

“TO LIVE IS CHRIST, TO DIE IS”

**Text: “To live is Christ, to die is gain.
Philippians 1:21**

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My guess is that not one of you came to worship this morning expecting to be greeted with a pop quiz on the ultimate purpose of your life. “Ah Reverend, give me a break. I worked hard all week.” Surely you would prefer a good Bible story or some useful homelitical advice to get you through the coming week. But undaunted, I press on with an opening question: why do you think we are here, on earth I mean, not in this sanctuary? What is the number one thing you could not/cannot live without? What is your primary concern? What one pursuit would you elect to be the Captain of your ship, or even better, of your soul? What is the first piece of ground you would claim, and the last you would want to occupy? What would you choose to hang on to, if all else were taken from you? I have asked myself these questions over and over this week as I prepared for our sermon together.

During the week, on Friday, the Nation marked the 40th Anniversary of the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., as he stood on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis. To many it was an idle, casual observance. To others it was as fresh and new and important as the anniversary of Pearl Harbor is each year down at the American Legion Post down in McKee’s Rocks, PA. I don’t know what you think of Dr. King. I have found that there are some varying opinions. I do not mean to be a bother, but I have always held a special reverence for a sentence he wrote a few days before his death. He knew that the possibility was real that he might die for what he believed. His friends and family cautioned him, pleaded with him, to be more careful. But he responded with this little sentence: “If you have not found something you would die for, you are not fit to live.” If you have not found something you would die for, you might not be fit to live. Something you would die for, which might that be another way to phrase our opening question. Have you found one for yourself?

Which brings us to St. Paul and this resounding text from the first chapter of his letter to the Philippians, verses 20 and 21. Paul said it this way: “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. For to me, to live is Christ, to die is gain.” To the apostle it was a simple answer: the sole, salient, single, never-to-be-compromised goal was to live for Jesus Christ. And if in the time and providence of God, his time to go should come, so be it, bring it on. That too, belongs to Christ.

“I am hard pressed between the two anyway”, Paul went on: between life and death. Part of me would just as soon go on and be forever with the Lord, in heaven. The other part of me prays that while I am here upon the earth the power and peace of Jesus Christ will shine in me and through me, and be seen by all whose lives I touch... As if he were saying, “It really isn’t up to me anyway. I did not choose the moment of my birth, and I shall not choose the moment of my death. Those are in the hands of God. If He chooses to take me home, I shall go willingly; if he chooses to have me stay, I shall commit myself with equal fervor. To live is Christ, to die is gain!”

That all might seem a little heavy, I know. Let me lighten it up with a story. It is about a certain man who died and was surprised that he went to heaven. As he adjusted to the shock, he began to enjoy himself. Heaven was all he was told it would be. He could eat almost anything he wanted, no calorie counting there. He could play golf for free anytime at all, at the finest golf courses in the sky. He could sit by the fire whenever he chose for as long as he chose. He adored it. One day he met his wife, who arrived a little later. Like many husbands he began to criticize her. “For what?” she asked, astonished, “I know it is going to be my fault, but what did I do this time? What could possibly be wrong with heaven?” “Oh nothing, Stella,” he said, “but, if you had not insisted on all those bran flakes and broccoli and exercise machines, I could have been here 10 years ago!”

Or like the little lady said to her pastor when he asked her what she thought heaven was like. She replied, “Oh I am sure that it is a grand and wonderful place, where we will all live forevermore in peace and loveliness after we die; but please let us not speak of such unpleasant things.”

Think with me a little about how you would end the sentence which is posed in our sermon title. Suppose I asked you to join me in a completion test, which some students prefer anyway. So please complete the two parts of Paul’s parallel formula. Your deal. For you, to live is....what?

And our initial question comes back again, what do you live for anyway? What is your bottom line? Look at some possible answers with me for a minute, not right or wrong in contrast to Paul, just some answers I have heard. Some of course would rifle back, “to find pleasure”, “to make a good deal”, “to amass a fortune”, “to get ahead at any cost in this dog-eat-dog kind of world.” I leave them to their own quagmire, as I turn to the people I know in the Churches I have served.

For example: I have known a ton of Christian parishioners, friends and fellow travelers, who if they were honest would have to say, “For us, for me, to live is.... to be successful, to be happy, to have enough for me and my family to afford the pleasures we want and be able to relax in our retirement. No criticism intended. Nothing wrong with that. I have always tried to look out for family, first my parents, brother and sisters, then my Peggy and our children and grandchildren. My wife still says that I am a kind and thoughtful husband. (Or at least she said it once three weeks ago!) But, that’s a good goal to work on. But Paul did not write: To live is.... to be successful, or to live is to have everything I need to insure a good future. He wrote, “To live is Christ.” Nothing else, nothing less!

Let me insert a true story here about a friend named I used to have named Thong Vu. He was a Vietnamese refugee. One of our former congregations adopted his family to re-settle them in a nice neighborhood around our church. He had been a successful businessman in Saigon when the Kymer Rouge Communists came thundering down the Ho Chi Mihn trail. It was only a matter of time before the Yanks would be gone and North Vietnam would pummel the South. Thong Vu, being goal oriented and worried about his family, converted everything he had to cash. Wise man. He sold everything he could and filled two huge suitcases with cash, Glorious, high denominations of dependable South Vietnamese paper money. Everything he owned in two bags. As one of the Boat People, he then crossed the sea with his family to their first refugee camp.

On and on they went. Thong Vu doing everything to protect his precious luggage. Later, he was successful in carting them from one refugee camp to another; then through customs to Los Angeles, Colorado, and finally to Pennsylvania. When he arrived he was so grateful his suitcases had survived: no one stole a single bill; he didn’t forget or lose them; and the money didn’t even get wet.

But, you are ahead of me, aren’t you? When the Communists took over Saigon and the Bank of South Vietnam, their first official action was to declare the former money worthless, absolutely worthless, nada, not worth a farthing. There was old Thong Vu with two suitcases full of paper money which was not worth a penny. He eventually began to give his bills away to children as souvenirs. He had been geared to think that he couldn’t live without his stash of cash. He later

learned to laugh at himself; it was all so funny....Some would say, for me, to live is to achieve success.

Others would move it up a notch and say, For me, to live is....to be useful, to find God's will and do it, to help others along the way. To live is to know the Scriptures, to fulfill what it means in Matthew 25 when it says that it is not so much what we say as what we do. "If you have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren," Jesus said, "you have done it unto me." Great goal: surely better than the first answers. One of the most praiseworthy goals in life would be "to make a difference." As one professor said in his final lecture: "I want to live so that someone will miss me after I am gone." I want my life to matter. I want to help. Like my Grandfather's favorite poem, "Let me live in a house by the side of the road and be a friend to man." Yeah, Coonie. Good goal.

It sounds good, but again that is not what Paul was writing about. Sure he would agree that we need good works to prove our initial faith; "We love because he first loved us." There are some hints in the New Testament that being Christ-like has more to do with what we do to share the love of God than it does to what we believe within our hearts. But not with Paul. He closes the door on all that when he says simply: "To live is Christ."

Kipling once advised a graduating class of British students at Oxford to be careful. "We are all trained to do our best;" he said, "you have been taught to value the good things of the earth, like nice houses and fine automobiles and vacations and ornaments and the finest of this and that and everything. But one day," he continued, "you will meet a person who cares for none of these things. I pray you will then see the richness in that person and know how poor you really are."

Last Sunday Martha Bartz was here as the guest soloist. She sang Edwin Child's setting of the famous Irish hymn: "Be Thou My Vision." The second stanza goes:

"Riches I heed not, nor man's empty praise,
Thou mine inheritance, now and always;
Thou and thou only, first in my heart.
High King of heaven, my treasure thou art."

"To live is Christ." Paul. And he had earned his right to say it. He had suffered much in his pursuit of the Gospel. He was disappointed and deserted by friend and foe alike. And he got cranky about it sometimes.

I am not sure you would have liked St. Paul, not all of the time anyway. At times in his letters he was abrupt and judgmental, defensive, critical. He had a variety of moods and his letters reflect them all. In Romans, e.g., he is a systematic thoughtful, logical thinker who wrote the finest theological book ever written. If you want the best summary of the Christian Faith, read Romans. In Corinthians he came down off his high theological Chair and dealt honestly with some down to earth, some rather earthy issues. One guy was chasing after his father's second wife. Another was drinking too much. Some early arrivers in one whole congregation drank down all the wine and ate all the bread which was on the altar for communion, before everyone had arrived for the service. In Galatians, he became a verbal warrior: animated, even angry and incensed that they had the nerve to turn away from his teaching and take up with other preachers. Those "other gospels" will not save you, they will condemn you!"

But when he comes to Philippians, Paul is gentle and grateful, kind and friendly, in a reflective mood. Philippi was a city of note in the ancient world. Philip II named it for himself when he ruled the world for Greece. The shades of Brutus and Cassius wandered lost around the town. When Octavian became Emperor, he made it his favorite town, a Roman Colony.

Then along came Paul to Philippi. He had a dream one night (We are now in the Book of Acts, Chapter 16). While he was still across the Sea, he had a dream one night in which a Man from Macedonia appeared and asked him to come over the water and help them. Macedonia was a grand Republic back then. (By the way, it was much in the news this past week. The present Republic, the former Yugoslavia, was presented for membership at the NATO conference, to the chagrin of Vladimir Putin of Russia.) But it flourished and prospered back then. It sat on the vital trade route between Europe and the Middle East and Asia. It was a thriving town of commerce and other princely virtues.

Anyway, led by the vision in his dream Paul went over and founded his first church is what is now Europe. His first convert at Philippi was Lydia, the accomplished business women who dealt in purple goods, a wealthy woman who helped Paul. She was so touched by his preaching that she and her household accepted Jesus and were baptized. She later invited Paul and Silas to stay at her house, which they did. Lavish quarters for the vagabond evangelists.

Then, what a shame, Paul and Silas ended up in prison. It happened like this: There was a young slave girl there who was a gifted fortune teller, so much so that her owners made a lot of money with her divinations. People will still pay a lot of money to hear some one predict what is in store for their future. This girl followed the apostles around for many days, recognizing them intuitively as servants of the most high, and shouting about it as Paul tried to speak in the square. While true; she disrupted the Apostle and distracted people from his preaching. So, “very much annoyed”, (I warned you about Paul’s temper) it says, he ordered the spirit to come out of her immediately, and it did.

Which of course infuriated her owners, for they could make no more money off the girl. Her fortune-telling days were done for good. It is probable that she also was converted to Christ as well. Then the leaders dragged Paul and Silas into the square where a mock trial was held on the charge that they were unlawful Jews, fomenting troubles for the state. They were stripped and beaten, severely flogged it reads, and thrown into the innermost underground dungeon in the town prison, where in their putrid cell, their feet were fastened in the stocks.

You likely know the rest of the story. At Midnight, while Paul and Silas were singing hymns and praying with the other prisoners, God sent a violent earthquake during which all the walls were crushed and the gates were broken down and even the chains on their ankles were unloosed. They were free. The Guard, thinking they all had escaped, which is exactly what every prisoner on earth would choose to do if the walls came tumbling down and their chains were unfastened, the guard was about to kill himself for fear of what would happen to him when the escape was discovered. Paul assured him that all the prisoners were still there.

The Jailer, forever grateful, was also converted to Christ, along with his whole household, all of whom were also baptized. When Paul finally got to tell the authorities that he and Silas were Roman citizens, and by law were entitled to certain rights, the Town leaders were apologetic and released them, but asked that for their own safety they leave the city. So, they went to say goodbye to Lydia and departed for Thessalonica.

By the time Paul wrote his letter to the Philippians, so much more has happened that we cannot linger on the details. What is important is that Paul was in prison again, this time most likely in Rome. The Philippians have heard about his misfortune; and they were worried for his safety. So

they took up a little offering and sent their pastor, a man named Epaphroditus, to visit Paul and to deliver their little gifts to the beloved apostle. He did. But while there, Epaphroditus took suddenly and seriously ill. The Christians back home heard about that, and coupled with Paul's imprisonment, they were devastated. If God is good, how could all this happen? Paul, knowing that they were wracked with worry, sent Epaphroditus back to Philippi the minute he got better, with the letter we now have in the Bible.

It was primarily a thank you letter for their kindness. But since he knew they were having trouble finding the Will of God in their fears for the life of their pastor and the possible death of St. Paul, he added on some kindly words about faith and the priorities of the Christian life. He says that he was able to keep the joy of Christ and his redemption in spite of the troubles which came his way.

In fact, Paul went on, I want you to know that "what has happened to me has actually helped to spread the gospel". (1:12) God can still work all things together for good for those who love him and are called according to his purpose. He told them that his faithfulness had impressed the whole Imperial Guard, and that others from all around were coming to faith in Jesus Christ. That was all he cared about, to make disciples of all people. "I continue to rejoice," he wrote, "for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, this will turn out for my deliverance. I want Christ to be exalted in everything that happens to my body, whether by life or by death." (1:19f) He wrote that he still wanted to come and visit them. You see...part of him is ready to die, the other part keeps on planning to live. One foot on land, the other in the sea.

I read sometime ago that when the wife of the well known Scottish preacher, Arthur Gossip died suddenly, he admitted to his congregation the next Sunday morning that he was broken hearted and devastated, of course. "The Earth itself caved in", is the way he put it. But then he added that he would do his best to continue as their preacher; yet he felt like a homesick laddie away at boarding school for the first time; who, if he is wise, will throw himself fully into the work around him and do his best to do his part. "And aye, he does it too." Gossip added. "But always, always, some part of that homesick boy is saved up for the dreams, the anticipation, the longing for the day when he will be able to go back home with the ones in the familiar company of those he loves and be privileged to stay in their company forever." He does his part while he is there, but now and then he rises up on his tiptoes to look down to the end of the term.

Which is exactly where our text comes in again. “I don’t know which I prefer”, wrote Paul, I am hard pressed between the two. “For me to live is Christ and to die is gain.” (1:21) One desire is to depart and be with Christ”. I would rather have all of the uncertainty as to what is coming behind me. While I live I do not know what God has in store. I don’t know what to think of what might be coming next; I only pray that I will remain faithful. From his prison cell he wrote that he would actually prefer not to keep on struggling and striving against the problems of the world and its vagaries.

However, the other part of me, an equal part, he wrote, wants to share in the work of the Gospel, and to give more children of the earth the opportunity to receive the gift of salvation in Christ. I would also love to share in the good news of your faithfulness and to come and see you there in Philippi. It is not morbid. As he nears the end of his life he wants to put it all in perspective.

Like a friend in Arizona told me not long ago, I don’t mind dying, not at all; but oh how I would love to live long enough to see how my gifted grandchildren turn out. Or the lady up in Greenwich who told her pastor, “Oh don’t be ridiculous, I am not afraid to die, I just don’t want to leave Greenwich.” Touché.

But meanwhile, have this mind in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, i.e. while he was safely on the other side, seated at the right hand of the Father in heaven, still he emptied himself and took on the form of a servant, he humbled himself, and became obedient, even to his death on the cross. (Philippians 2:5-8) Why would he do that, why bother Lord, they will only kill you? Why? You know the answer already: “God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whoever believes in him will not perish but have everlasting life.” (John 3:16)

Well, it is time to close: let me do it with a story. Perhaps you have read The Color of Water”, a wonderful book by James McBride, about the faithfulness of his mother who as a girl escaped the holocaust of Nazi Germany to come to the United States of America. She was converted to Christ. She married the son of a black Baptist minister in Harlem. They had 12 children, an enormous undertaking all by itself. But then her husband died suddenly and left her as a single mom with one dozen youngish children. What would she ever do? They all turn fine, if you can believe me. Doctors and writers and professors, graduates of Yale and Harvard and Columbia. But what a price she paid. She got depressed working three jobs, which still were not enough. She had her moments, days of darkness when she would disappear and kinfolk would have to care for the

children. Some days she would stand at the tenement window looking out over the sink for hours on end, wondering why God gave her this kind of life. “As I look back”, her son, the author wrote, “Mother was utterly confused in a myriad of ways. Except for one thing: she was never confused about Jesus Christ. How she did it I do not know, but he gave her hope. She lived for Christ. He was her mainstay, her only anchor in the storm. Jesus saw her through. His love and faithfulness gave her the strength to keep on going until her days on earth were through; a strength which in turn, she gave to all of us.” For her to live was Christ, to die was gain.

Each and all of us get depressed from time to time. We all get confused now and again, with far less reason than Mrs. McBride. Depression and confusion are givens in the way we have to live our hurried, demanding lives. So be it. But never, never, ever allow yourself to get confused about Jesus. Keep him in the center of your life, whether in living or in dying. He will see you through! “To live is Christ; to die is gain.” For now and forever more, Amen.