

Philippians 1

The last time I preached on this passage would have been on May 6, 2018. For those of you who weren't around then, that was the year our son was very ill. He got sick in early December of 2017 while he was visiting his sister in Chicago.

He spent 7 weeks at Northwestern Hospital in Chicago, came home for a couple weeks and then spent another month in the hospital at UNMC. He then stayed with us until September so we could help manage IV nutrition, tube feeding, abscess drainage tubes and pain management.

When I preached that sermon, he was camped out with his medical equipment in our basement. He had a long way to go, but we were feeling pretty good about his prospects for a full recovery and that he would get back to normal health. And he has...he's doing fine.

The folks of Bethlehem and Zion were immensely supportive of me and my family during all that. So my sermon on this text was my thank you to all of you.

I continue to thank God for all of you as we navigate this current strange time together. Other pastors have not been as lucky.

The church has been caught in the crosshairs of the polarized politics of Covid 19 and of racial justice.

The other day I read an article from Baptist News Global, which reports religious news. The article was actually an op ed piece entitled "Too many pastors are falling on their own swords."

The article talked about the increase of anxiety, depression, and even suicidal thoughts in pastors trying to lead their congregations through this...congregations that are sometimes as divided as the national scene is.

One of the pastors mourned a congregation member lost to Covid after reopening too early.

Others described being caught between councils and members who insisted church reopen right away and the science that says not yet. One pastor did a survey – almost never a good idea – asking people to voice their opinion about reopening. Half said they'd leave if the church didn't reopen right away and the other half said they'd leave if it did.

The economic hit in one congregation forced the lead pastor to fire half the staff.

Another pastor talked about racism in a sermon and later had an angry church member show up and kick his office door off its hinges.

I personally know someone who was already semi-retired and doing an interim who decided to retire completely because the congregation he was serving wanted to reopen before he felt it was safe.

We've had none of that. Everyone may not agree with everything we've decided or everything I've said, but people are hanging in there. We are blessed to have the council leadership we do at both congregations. I am not feeling any need to fall on my sword.

In fact I am once again saying... I thank God every time I think of you.

But God isn't done with us yet. As Paul says in verse 6, God has begun a good work in us and is working to bring it to completion.

God is working in us to bring us to that harvest of righteousness. It has been my experience that there are times we are to wait and let God work, and there are other times when we're called to do something.

Knowing when to wait and pray, and when and how to act is the stuff of discernment.

It seems to me, that like it or not, the church is going to continue to be caught in the crosshairs of political polarization.

We can talk about neither Paul's letters, nor Jesus' teachings, without talking about things like ethics and justice and our relationships with other people...how we're to live in the world God has put us in and how we're to be the tenders of creation.

And that will create disagreements.

It did in the first century...sometimes with fatal results. Paul is a political prisoner here, imprisoned by the state for proclaiming a gospel that upset the status quo of Roman peace. Although we don't know for sure, he may have been executed by Rome. Jesus was definitely executed by Rome.

To have any kind of relevance...to proclaim the good news of God's reign...will put the church in the political crosshairs of those invested in a way of life that opposes God's will... a way of life that values certain groups and not others...a way of life that focuses more on individual

rights and privileges than on the common good...a way of life that isn't interested in lifting up the lowly.

So if we're going to be in the political crosshairs anyway, we might as well do our best to navigate that and to discern what is best. We should hear Paul's prayer for the Philippians also as a prayer for us....

I pray That our love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight ¹⁰ to help us to determine what is best...

Knowledge...insight...love

Those three things can help us as individuals and as the community of Christ navigate a politically, socially, and economically tumultuous time in a way that is faithful to that harvest of righteousness.

Let's start with knowledge. In some ways that should be the easiest of the three. Knowledge is about learning things. I love to learn things.

But we've got to be careful about where we're getting our knowledge from. There are great resources, both in print and online, to learn a little bit about Covid and pandemics and what the studies are showing as we move through this.

There are great resources, printed and online, to help learn about the structural racism that did not end when either slavery or Jim Crow ended.

There are resources to learn the basics of economics, the constitution, and government.

There are two big enemies of true knowledge – first, thinking you already know something and second, rejecting anything that doesn't fit with what you think is true. There's a lot of that right now. That arrogance and unwillingness to have our views challenged is killing us...it's a product of that cosmic force of evil Paul talked about in his letter to the Ephesians.

Next is insight...insight means to see within...to have a deep understanding of something...a person, an event, an institution, and so on.

Insight goes beyond knowledge...it looks beneath a person's actions and beliefs and wonders how they got there. What pain lies beneath the rage? What life experiences shaped them? What are their struggles?

Insight sees the impact economic structures and institutions in our society have on different groups of people. Insight takes knowledge and makes connections and patterns that help us understand the world on a deeper level.

Insight also makes connections between our world and the God revealed in Jesus Christ. Insight helps us put ourselves in the ongoing story of God's work to save creation.

And finally, love. Without love, all the knowledge and insight in the world will only serve to puff us up, and not build up the community. That's the basic gist of Paul's whole first letter to the Corinthians.

Without love, all our knowledge just makes us pompous and self-righteous.

I believe love is our only way out of the social and political tangle we're in now. But we can't do it by ourselves. We need the community of faith...our church community...other church communities...we need to learn and love alongside them.

We need the people in our community we don't agree with to give us a chance to practice insight, love and forgiveness.

But most of all, we need God. And we need prayer.

Through the work of death and resurrection, God has only begun the good work in us. and God will bring it to completion by the day of Christ's return. In the meantime, we remain a work in progress. God isn't finished with us.

One of my spiritual guides, Father Richard Rohr, talks about the spiritual life as a cycle of order, disorder, and re-order. Order is a more primitive spirituality...one where all the rules and laws make sense and create a sense of safety and security.

Disorder is when that is shattered by some event. We are very much in the disorder part of that cycle. God will bring us through to a new sense of order...one that is different and richer and deeper.

In the meantime, we are called to pray...to pray for God's guidance as we grow in knowledge and insight...to pray for God to make us willing to love even the people we least want to love...and to pray for those we'd rather not pray for.

And we're called to pray for the knowledge, insight and love that will lead us to know what is best and to be that harvest of righteousness.

I give God thanks for you and I believe we can be the kind of community the world needs us to be right now.