

Sermon TUMC - January 10, 2021

Introduction to Philippians

Michele Rae Rizoli

Acts 16:9-15

Philippians 1:1-6

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

It's been a difficult week with the covid number increasing, the overt political unrest just south of us, and the displays of racism in downtown Toronto. In the Fall we asked "what is being revealed?" And now we see evil manifesting itself more clearly. This is not the kind of Epiphany we might have been looking for, but there it is. Light is being shed and shows that it is a time of uncertainty.

It is also a time for us to re-ground ourselves in the values and beliefs we share as followers of Christ.

This is hard for me to say, but the truth is that unfortunately **we are not living in unprecedented times**. It sure feels like it, but this is the latest version of the principalities and powers of this world manifesting themselves. We need only ask war survivors and refugees from other parts around the world what it's like to live through such times when violent and corrupt systems are acting up and breaking down.

One particularly disturbing aspect of the protesters in Washington DC is that they carried "Christian" slogans beside racist symbols and they had the support of religious leaders. We need only ask devout muslims or jews what it is like to see a warped version of your cherished religion being used to oppress and attack people. It is so very painful to see our cherished peaceful precepts turned into weapons against others in God's name.

What we are witnessing is the underside of systems of power and empire that need to be revealed and brought down: exploitative economy, toxic masculinity,

racism, white supremacy, rugged individualism, blind religion and the persistent myth of violence; all these ravage our planet.

Whether we like it or not, we are entangled in these systems, and, as people of privilege, we may suffer repercussions even as we work to bring forth justice and change. It may become even more uncomfortable.

We hope and pray that what we are seeing are the death pangs of deadly systems and that this moment in history will make room for truth and justice. And I do cling to knowing that we, as a church, have each other and God to weather any crisis.

What is required of us as followers of Jesus in a time such as this? Now, more than ever we must **hold firm to our commitments to live by the values of God's kingdom of justice and peace and non-violence as taught to us and empowered in us by Jesus Christ.** We are called not to defend ideologies, but to stand against evil in Christ's name. We may be called to empty ourselves of some privileges, to have the mind of Christ, as Paul writes to the Philippians (2:5)

In the middle of all this, the Preaching Team is embarking on a study of the book of Philippians leading up to Lent, and we begin that today by looking at some of the context for this book of the bible. We pray God's blessing and Spirit's breath to inspire us.

What can we, isolated, quarantined and scattered Toronto United Mennonite Church discern from God through this ancient letter that has become scripture? Is it relevant?

Philippians is a letter written by the apostle Paul who was in prison for the umpteenth time for proclaiming that Jesus is more powerful than Caesar and the political systems of the time, the Roman Empire. He is in the company of his colleague Timothy. He is writing this letter (or parts of letters, depending on your scholarly perspective) to express his gratitude that the church in Philippi sent him material help (money, food?) with a guy named Epaphroditus as a courier. A courier who apparently becomes deathly ill at one point.

It is not clear where Paul is imprisoned when writing this, mostly because that happened to him a lot, nor is it clear exactly when. Likely in the mid to late part of the 50's. Not the 1950's, mind you, the literal year 58 or thereabouts, so it was written close to 2000 years ago!

It is a letter about the mission and character of Jesus, who, I might point out, was himself put to death for challenging the systems of power of *his* day. This was not because Jesus taught some kind of saccharine “be kind to one another” or “one day you’ll get to heaven”, but because he called for a “new kingdom of God” and said to the rulers of his day “the way you’re doing things is not working.”

To be clear, the call to be like Jesus is not only a personal or spiritual response, but a deep hope for the church as citizens in the world.

Philippians is a letter from a prisoner of Rome to a bedraggled group of proto christians — early Jesus followers — who are living in a centre of power, the city of Philippi, where many Roman military folks went to retire. It was a Roman colony known for its patriotic nationalism.¹ There was some tension, shall we say. This is the first gathering of believers, the first church in Eastern Europe. As they receive the letter they are being rattled by friends and foes and bombarded with false teaching - fake news? — and by demands that they show their true loyalties. And in the midst of that turmoil, they kept on being generous towards Paul and towards one another.

We don't know a lot about that church at Philippi but we do know a few more things. Let's have a look.

According to the book of Acts, written by the same writer as the book of Luke, Paul's early ministry was a travelling discernment process of where the Spirit of God was leading. One night, Paul had a dream that someone from Macedonia was asking him to come and help. So, when he woke up he and some buddies set sail for the Roman colony of Philippi to bring them the good news of Jesus.

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oE9qqW1-BkU>

Following their Jewish custom, when the sabbath came in Philippi, Paul and his companions sought a group with whom to celebrate. It seemed to be Paul's way of doing things to find the Jewish folk in a place and to connect with them. So they connected with some women gathered out by the river for prayer. You will recall that in Jewish custom it is the women who hold responsibility for the sabbath blessing.

Trent reminded us at Preaching Team that in order to establish a synagogue, 10 Jewish men were required. So the fact that Paul and his companions found these women outside the city gates, might have meant that there weren't very many male-led Jewish families in Philippi at the time.

(Incidentally, next week before the service, Trent will make a presentation from a biblical studies perspective about the letter to the Philippians during the faith formation hour at 10, just before the worship service. If you join that call you'll get some maps and other interesting structural and thematic info.)

There by the river Paul and his companions meet Lydia, a woman trader, head of a household, who eagerly embraced Paul's message that Jesus was the promised Messiah, a new revelation, God in human form. She was a powerful woman who grasped the significance of Paul's message. She had great influence and became Paul's patron in Philippi and one of the leaders of the church. She was powerful and influential and generous. Sounds a lot like our TUMC Lydia. :-)

While in Philippi that first time, Paul and Silas get into some serious trouble with the civil authorities. For some strange reason, the retired Roman military folks aren't receptive to a message that Jesus is the true king of the world. ² Go figure!

Then one day, they run into a young slave woman who was being exploited in the marketplace for her gifts of fortune telling. When she saw them (every time she saw them!) she kept on hollering that they were servants of the most high

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oE9qqW1-BkU>

God who were proclaiming the way of salvation. This apparently went on for several days. You'd think it was a handy advertising tool, kind of like those megaphones on top of cars that used to drive around town in my childhood. But not to Paul. More out of annoyance than out of mercy for the girl, he cast out that spirit of divination and she stopped yelling — and became useless to her captors. We don't know how she felt about any of this. For my part, I hope that Lydia eventually took her in and she became part of the church in Philippi.

Her exploiters, her owners, were very upset that their revenue stream had been cut short. And so they accused Paul and Silas of disrupting Roman customs with their “illegal” Jewish ways. It's always so handy to accuse minorities of not behaving properly, a page from the conflict handbook. The magistrates, as magistrates are wont to do, turned to violence and had them severely flogged and thrown into prison. “That ought to take care of it,” they likely thought, “I mean, who cares about a couple of religious rabble rousers, right?”

So there they were, Paul and Silas, beaten up, and chained sitting in a Roman prison in Philippi. Since there were no systems for taking care of prisoners, it is possible that their new church friends had sent them some food. Maybe this is how a pattern of helping Paul while he's in prison got started.

What would *you* do in that situation? Well, they decided to spend the night singing and praying, and the rest of the prisoners listened to the free religious entertainment — what else was there to do, really? They were literally a captive audience! At midnight an earthquake shook the place and everyone's chains fell off. Everyone. What would you do in *that* situation?

Well, they all just sat there, rather in awe, I'd imagine. And the jailer, seeing all the doors open was about to do something drastic — take his own life — when Paul told him to wait, that they were all still there. The jailer — whose name we don't know — could hardly believe it. He tended their wounds, he took them home, fed them and became a believer in Jesus along with his entire household! They were all baptized. Amazing.

The next morning Paul took legal recourse and pointed out to the authorities that he was a Roman citizen and should never have been treated the way he

was treated. They apologize but still ask Paul and his companions to leave the city. And they do.

That is quite a start to a congregation, isn't it? Imagine the stories the folks at Philippi would tell each other. Imagine the bonds they share with Paul and his companions after having been through all of that. Imagine the unlikely connections between the new convert jailer's household and the merchant Lydia's household. Imagine the kinds of tensions that might arise between such different groups. And on top of that, this is a group that is now seen with suspicion by local authorities. These are the origins of the church at Philippi.

This all happened several years before the letter (or letters) we now have before us, but it gives us a bit of an idea of the context that forged their relationship with Paul. The church in Philippi certainly had first hand experience of the kinds of support he needed while in prison and even while he was on the road in other places. And so when they heard he was in prison again, who know's where (scholars disagree) they acted by sending their brother Epaphroditus to minister to Paul and then to bring them news back.

Other than the fact that it's a great background story, the point of telling you all this is at least partly to show that the church has always travelled in tension with the powers that be: the merchant, the magistrates, the Roman citizenship system. The realities of suffering and imprisonment that Paul speaks of in the letter to the Philippians are not all in the realm of the "spiritual" but in the everyday ways people live their lives in a culture. This is at least in part why this letter is still relevant to us.

If you haven't already read through the letter to the Philippians, consider doing so this week and in the weeks to follow. See what speaks to you, to us in the midst of all this mess we are living in.

Those of you who grew up in the church might recognize several tidbits and verses. You may even have memorized some of Philippians or seen parts embroidered on grandma's wall. I urge you to "resist" putting Paul's wisdom only in the realm of ideas, and hold it in tension with that congregation's experience and our own experience.

Paul was not try writing a theological treatise, though inevitably his theology shines through.

We do not have time today to go further into a review of the structure of the book. But what are some of the themes in Philippians and what is something specific that we can carry with us into our week?

In the first Part Paul focuses on gratitude for the Philippian congregation's help, and affirmation that God is at work among them (1:6). He hopes that this congregation will produce a harvest of justice, through Jesus Christ (1:9). And live lives worthy of the gospel of love and self-sacrifice. (1:27) or as one translation put it "Your life as citizens should be consistent with the good news of the Messiah. (The Living Bible).

I can echo those sentiments and this admonishment for us at TUMC. "Your life as citizens should be consistent with the good news of the Messiah. We *are* caring for one another, we *are* trying to live lives that are aligned with God's kingdom of peace and justice. Keep it up, now more than ever.

And a final specific take-home for this week.

Paul is constantly writing about rejoicing in the Lord. This is not a frivolous meme about positive thinking — no matter what those embroidered plaques on grandma's wall (or Facebook) say! :-). This is about a deep abiding and knowing that we are rooted in God's good work in us, God's salvation.

In chapter 4 Paul addresses this group of people who are fearful and worried (much as we might be) by offering the following words of wisdom. I will end with this, using *The Voice* translation of the New Testament.

Most of all friends, always rejoice in the Lord! I never tire of saying it: rejoice! Keep your gentle nature so that all people will know what it looks like to walk in his footsteps. The Lord is ever present with us. Don't be anxious about things; instead, pray.

Pray about everything. God longs to hear your requests, so talk to God about your needs and be thankful for what has come. And know that the peace of God (a peace that is beyond any and all of our human understanding) will stand watch over your hearts and minds in Jesus, the Anointed one.

Finally, sisters and brothers, fill your mind with beauty and truth. Meditate on whatever is honourable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is good, whatever is virtuous and praiseworthy. Keep to the script: whatever you learned and received and heard and saw me, Paul, do it and the God of peace will walk with you.