

Sermon title: **Fragrant Offering**

What follows is not the sermon script but rather a highlighting of what I was trying to achieve.

The main point that I wanted to communicate is that we are called to a profound unity and purity of life and this is only possible as we take up the pattern of Christ, as we empty ourselves, especially of our privileges. As we do this the presence of Christ is experienced, that is the fragrance of Christ is released among us and the wider world. Our unity and our purity of life make for a powerful attraction.

This sermon began by painting a picture of what an early Christian gathering might have looked like in the hard core Roman city of Philippi. Here we find both Lydia, a wealthy businesswoman, and one of the most hated men in the city, the jailer, suddenly worshipping together! We see other extraordinary things like Jews eating at the same table with pagans. The astonishment continues as we find men and women in ministry together, side-by-side. Finally, what are we to make of that master and slave sitting together and singing?

An entirely different narrative was being played out from that of the Roman Imperial narrative. Rome maintained these divisions, the Christ narrative healed them.

How did such an extraordinary gathering come about? They had witnessed an unforgettable thing. They had seen a man stripped and beaten in public. His name was Paul. Why? Because he had uttered the unthinkable, that Caesar was not Lord, but rather a Jewish king named Jesus.

One of my goals in the sermon was to create concrete images that can be remembered after the sermon was over.

The Letter:

The second half of the sermon dwells on the shape of the letter and its overall message. My goal was to show that Paul's letters are not catalogues of dry theological beliefs, isolated from people, but rather letters woven into the events and people in Philippi.

Another major goal was to show that Paul's letters are not haphazard or random thoughts thrown together without any flow. Some scholars use the image of, "pearls on a string." A well known and respected women theologian named Morna Hooker said that such a metaphor is a typical masculine approach to the Bible, that is isolating one or two verses from the whole letter. She says something to the effect that, Any woman knows that the arrangement of the pearls is as important as the individual pearls. I like that a lot!

I tried to show the beautiful and simple symmetry that we find in this letter. At the centre of the letter are two witnesses, Timothy and Epaphroditus, people who have taken risks in the work of the gospel. The theme of two witnesses in Hebrew scripture is very significant.

I go on to explore the symmetry as we move from the centre out. On the one side of this centre we have a story of Paul's sacrifice. We find Paul longing to be with the Philippians but he says that he also longs to be with Christ, which is far better. For him to remain alive is a sacrifice. He refers to this later on as, "a drink offering poured out on the sacrifice and service of your faith. "

We find a similar theme of sacrifice on the other side of the letter when Paul talks about the Philippians' care packages and for their generosity in sending E. He says of this act of love that it is, "a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, well pleasing to God." this couplet shows the deep bonds between Paul and the Philippians, bonds of love and sacrifice that bring forth the fragrant aroma of Christ among his people and within the world. This image of a fragrant aroma is a powerful temple image that makes it clear that for Paul, the temple in Jerusalem has been transformed into these radical gatherings. God has come to dwell among his people in the most extraordinary and unexpected ways.

We find a similar couplet I entitle, "The way of emptying." On the one side we have the famous hymn where we hear of Christ not grasping for equality with God but rather becoming a human being, a slave, becoming obedient to death, even death on the cross.

This same theme of emptying is found on the other side of the letter as Paul, a prestigious Pharisee, a "prince among PhD's," gives up this prestigious privilege and takes on the life of a slave. What happens in the first part of the letter with Jesus is mirrored in the last half the letter by Paul. These emptyings we could say also release the fragrant aroma of Christ within the community and within the whole world.

The letter is framed in a typical Jewish praise to God. Paul is the quintessential Psalmist, in the beginning he says, "to the praise and the glory of God." And he closes with, "now to the God be the glory!" Paul was The singer of songs, knowing the psalms from childhood on.

I said that at the centre of the letter are two young men, Timothy and Epaphroditus, but notice, wedged in-between the two of them is one small verse which is at the very centre of the letter which reads, "and I trust in the Lord that I myself also shall be coming shortly." 2:24

Paul knew that he is going to be released. He's confident of this because he knows the Philippians are praying for him. When Paul prayed he knew things would shift. He expected things to change. And they did!

(I argue that Paul's imprisonment was not in Rome but in Ephesus. For in Rome Paul had his heart set on going west to Spain. Philippi was in the opposite direction.

Prayer singing and worship was a central part of this first century Jewish radical.

The final point I wanted to make is that the evidence shows that Jesus was worshiped and called Lord from earliest times.

I close by challenging us in this time of deepening pandemic that we not only be content in plenty or in want, as Paul says, but as we lose more and more of our privileges that we rejoice in being in solidarity with Christ's suffering and the power of his resurrected life.

The theme that ties it all together is the fragrant aroma of Christ. When we empty ourselves and look to the interests of others, that not only is the essence and source of our holiness and our unity but also a powerful witness to the world around us.

Two Questions

1. Jesus was called "Lord" by the earliest followers, a title reserved exclusively for Yahweh in the OT, and consequently worshiped. What is your understanding and experience of Jesus?
1. Do we need Paul, or can we do without him? Why?