

“Citizens of Heaven” – Mar. 17, 2024

Fifth Sunday in Lent

Phil. 3:17-4:1

3:17 Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us. 18 For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears. 19 Their end is destruction, their god is the belly, and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things. 20 But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. 21 He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself. 4 I Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved. (NRSVUE)

Recently, I met Brother Daniel at Glastonbury Abbey in Hingham. Brother Daniel was my supervisor when I was a field education student at St. Francis House in downtown Boston 27 years ago. It was a day shelter for the unhoused. On top of assignments in the Day Center where hospitality and many interesting programs were offered to guests, I spent a good portion of time assisting an ESL class for non-native learners of English. I also led a Bible Study class each week, meeting people from different cultures and religious traditions.

When I found out Brother Daniel was in Hingham, I went to see him, and we finally met again after 27 years. Brother Daniel is a Benedictine monk and I believe we will continue to see each other. What joy and excitement!

St. Benedict, father of Western monasticism, lived in the 5th and 6th centuries AD, and he urged his monks to walk the extra mile during the Lenten season. Along with Lenten practices, whether of praying, fasting, or almsgiving, St. Benedict added one more thing: “Do it with joy. Do it with a smile.” When he spoke of the joy of Lent, St. Benedict was probably thinking of the Apostle Paul, who said, “Rejoice in the Lord always” in his letter to the Philippians (Phil. 4:4).

Do you remember I invited you to read Philippians as part of your Lenten journey this year? Philippians is often called the letter of joy. When Paul wrote the letter, he was surrounded by serious and real obstacles to joy. Paul was in prison facing probable death because of his faith in Christ (1:13).

Nevertheless, Paul was full of joy, and he was also inviting his Christian companions to rejoice in the Lord who suffered for them and rose again.

If I were to summarize the invitation to a life of joy in Philippians, it would be like this: “Rejoice because... Rejoice nevertheless... Rejoice always! Whatever happens to us, let us rejoice with one another.”

Inviting Philippian siblings to practice humbleness, compassion, and caring, Paul invited them to rejoice in the Lord who died for all and rose again.

Isn't it amazing that Paul wrote such a letter of exhortation in a cold, dark prison when he didn't know whether he would be released or executed? Paul must have felt helpless, anxious, and troubled in a situation where he did not know his fate.

Despite all the challenging circumstances, Paul found the source of joy in communion with the risen Christ. Paul did not allow anything to interfere with his genuine gratitude and joy with God, not even the threat of death.

Paul's letter shows that he was in a place of equanimity in his deep prayers. We can see in Paul's writings that whether well-fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want, he learned to be content in any and every situation, because the risen Christ was with him all the time, giving him strength. (4:13) In a nutshell, Paul found a source of joy, serenity, and strength in Christ that would never fail.

Today's reading is an invitation to live like Paul. Paul invited Philippians to imitate his and some others' examples. Before we quickly accuse Paul of being smug in his own faith, we need to keep in mind that in Paul's time, Paul's words and behaviors were one of a few and the most important Christian resources.

When Paul's epistles were circulated among the earliest congregants, the four Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were not yet written. Paul sent letters to the churches for pastoral and missional reasons, and the first letter to the Thessalonians became the first book of the New Testament. Meanwhile, in Philippi, most church members were newly converted Christians. Paul was their pastor, their mentor, their companion, and their living example for Christian life.

Although he was imprisoned, and members of the church in Philippi were often insulted or threatened because of their Christian faith, Paul wanted to encourage the Philippians to complete the race of faith to the end. In his metaphoric language, Paul said he was pressing on toward the goal for the heavenly prize in the race. He also invited the Philippians to join the race as a team: “We are on the right track. Let's stay on it!” Paul's earnest wish for the Philippians was to live every day and every moment as citizens of heaven--the life they could learn from Jesus who embodied God's self-giving love on the cross.

In contrast, Paul warned against those who made their belly their god and set their minds on earthly things. It was a warning against becoming greedy, immoral, and self-indulgent in the world. Their way of life was denying Christ who died on the cross with self-emptying love. Paul called them “enemies of the cross of Christ.”

Today’s reading often becomes Lenten reading because it helps our Lenten journey significantly deepen and bring life-changing experiences. The *Letter to the Philippians* is one of my favorite books in the Bible. I recommend Philippians to those who find the Bible too long to read, or to those who seek advice because they do not know where to start. It has only 4 chapters and is normally 5 pages in length. I also invite you to read, chew, swallow, and digest Philippians during this Lent and beyond.

Someone jokingly said that the Bible is the acronym for “**B**asic **I**nstructions **B**efore **L**eaving **E**arth.”¹ I hope you can find the B-I-B-L-E as you read Philippians. I like an invitation of Barbara Brown Taylor, an Episcopal preacher, to think about a pacifier or anesthesia that makes our daily lives comfortable, making us forget our heavenly citizenship. For Barbara, Lent is a season when we encounter the world without any pacifier or anesthesia to “find out what life is like with no comfort but God.”² We have two more weeks for Lent. Let us continue to contemplate what it means for heavenly citizens to live as temporary visitors or as resident aliens on Earth.

Paul was able to rejoice and be content in any and all circumstances. Paul was an ordinary person who was struggling, grieving, and suffering just like us, but he was able to rejoice, because his spiritual eyes were open to God who was with him every moment. Paul also invites us to live as citizens of heaven here and now, without being preoccupied by earthly things. Can we do that? We can do that not because we are able, but because God is always with us, empowering us to stand firm in our faith and deeply rooted in God.

Paul still calls and encourages us: “My fellow citizens of heaven, let us stay on the right track. When you stay, stand firm in God. When you run, press on toward the goal for the heavenly prize. You are God’s beloved children. That’s your heavenly identity!” And all God’s people say, “Amen!”

¹ Adam Hamilton, *The Walk: Five Essential Practices of the Christian Life*.

² Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home by Another Way*. (adapted)