

Sermon: "*Spiritual Strength*"

So, a few weeks ago, my husband stepped off a plane from Africa, rode 3 hours home to get back to Boone with a hurt back, had back surgery last week, prompting your associate pastor to heroically step up and take his place on the Guatemala Mission Trip this week, and Jason informs me that I'm preaching today! Great, I said. What's my passage....is this a new series? No, this is it. Everything we've been talking about for weeks....this whole theme of arriving....this is the last sermon in the whole series. You're the closer.

Thanks. No pressure.

Well, last week Jason preached about imitating others.....so, I'm aiming for Mariano Rivera here, the NY Yankees closer. I got to see him close a Yankees game last May for the win. I only wish I could close a game half as good as that man, but here goes...

When I realized that this was it! The last chapter and verse of the book of Philippians, the end of a series on "Arriving" mind you, my first thoughts are.... "How does this all end?" We need some good news.

This past week has been a blur...we learned about one of our own local high school students who took his own life, out of what despair, we don't know. Last Sunday many of, a lot of us actually, sat in the chapel to hear about the lives of children in Rwanda being so transformed, it was stunning! The joy of it was overflowing....but the *pain* of some of their situations....the reality of what they were living in, and with, and the stigma of children who felt nothing more than (and even less than) a dog that begs at times....that kind of pain, as JJ Brown mentioned, you can't even speak. You have to walk away, look high up to the mountains, cry out to a God whom we know is near, but Lord, let us feel that you're near now. How does this all end, on this long, long journey of arriving? Hear now the Word of the Lord.

Phil. 4: 10-23

My 3rd grader finished a 280 page novel the other day, and it was worthy of a reading celebration. He was proud, but he was also surprised. The novel ended really, really sad. And it brought a feeling of emotion that he didn't expect from simply reading a book. The story was about a really long journey that these children were taking to find their mother. At the end of the book, they finally arrived after driving from Kentucky all the way to Idaho. Their mother had died before they got there. It wasn't what my son expected. How could they go all that way, only to not reach what they were hoping. And how would they go on, now?

Our life is a journey. And it's a real journey! And, it's not always a happy road. Things don't always work out like we hoped. Paul's letter to the Philippians is one of the most personal letters of the Bible. It is filled with love and compassion and support. But, it's also filled with tension, disagreements among those in the church community, and sin. People don't always get along,

and relationships have to be sharpened in order to grow. Circumstances are sometimes hard. Paul after all, is writing from prison. Paul challenges us in this last part of his letter, to be content. This has always been one of my all-time favorite passages. Because I realized that contentment didn't come naturally for Paul, the Scriptures say he *learned* to be content. It was a practice! But, Paul makes it clear that he learns this whether he has plenty, or whether he has nothing at all. Can one be content, while starving on the streets? Or with no running water, or a dirt floor to sleep on? Is that possible? How can one be content in *all* situations?

As our Guatemala team is now worshipping in Patzibal, it reminds me of the last and only time I've ever been to Guatemala. I was a Sophomore in college. And, I was surrounded by orphans there who expressed more joy than I'd ever seen, and smiles that would melt your heart. In essence, these children honestly looked content. A 9 year old girl led our team around the town, inviting others in the community to come to church. JJ Brown will share in his mission moment later in the service about his time in Rwanda with ZOE ministry. These children are thriving in a program that helps them flourish and live sustainable lives. But, that doesn't mean their houses look like ours. And that doesn't mean they can take a vacation whenever they please. But, I can assure you what it does mean: they are content.

How do we become content in whatever our situation? What if we're single, aching for a soul-mate to share our life with? What if we've tried desperately to bear a child, only to find time and time and time again that we are barren? And what about if we do find ourselves in times of plenty? How do we still find contentment, without wanting more?

Paul goes on to say, "I can do all things through him who strengthens me." That's probably a verse that if you grew up churched, you memorized long ago. But, it's actually a verse I've struggled with a lot. At least, growing up with my "American culture" translation: "I" can do "all" things. What does that mean? Sounds like a superhero to me! Sometimes my boys will discuss "if you could have one super power, what would it be?" But, that's *not* what this verse is all about. It's not about getting whatever we want, achieving whatever we can, just because Christ is on our side. Remember, Paul is saying this from prison! Paul is *not* talking about success. He's *not* talking about accomplishments. He's not talking about doing, ***he's talking about enduring***—whatever may come, and still being able to call out & REJOICE! In the Old Testament, in Nehemiah Chapter 8, Verse 10 Scripture says, "the Joy of the Lord is my strength." This chapter in the New Testament Epistle of Philippians isn't about super hero strength, but the Spiritual Strength of God With Us, and In Us.

Eugene Peterson has translated the Bible in the Version called "The Message." Phil 4:13 reads like this, "I can make it through anything; in the One who makes me who I am." Another translation reads, "I have strength for everything in the One who gives me power." I love those translations.... It doesn't mean "I can do" it means, "I can make it because of the spiritual strength of God in me."

A friend of mine is a pastor and he and his wife have invested much of their lives in Haiti. In fact, during the earthquake of 2010, his wife had a mission team in Haiti. He didn't hear from her for days. They lost some of the orphans and co-workers they knew there that day. Haitians also have a different interpretation of this verse: "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." This friend was having a Bible Study with a Haitian, and they were reading the Creole rendition of the verse. Here's how it goes, "In any situation that appears before me, I can *degaje*, thanks to Christ who gives me strength." David, my friend, had expected to find the Creole word for "do," or "accomplish," But, not *degaje*! This word had a very different meaning. "Haitians use it in this way: If you don't have the skills or materials to do something correctly, you "degaje" it--make it work some other way." Dave writes, "For instance, if you don't have the right screws to mount a pencil sharpener to a desk, you can use nails or wire or even duct tape to keep it in place. You "*degaje*" it. I like that. Think of sayings that catch on in this country: My bad.....I know, right?....I'm just saying!" Well, make life work: Degaje it!¹ That's a saying we should hold on to! My friend Dave explains that the Haitian understanding is different from our American perspective. It's not "that with God's help we can make any dream come true." But rather, "with God's help, we can expect to *degaje*. We can get by; we can make it work."²

How does this series on "Arriving" end? How does Paul end after this amazing letter to the Philippians. We've been on this journey on arriving for weeks now! And, we've learned that we may not actually arrive anywhere, but that through it all, we continually seek God's face, learn to be content, and draw on strength for whatever the day brings. When we finally get to the end of Paul's letter to the Philippians, we are brought right back where we started. With GRACE. Paul opens with God's grace be with us, and ends it with the same. That's how life is! In the middle, we experience, learn, love, feel joy, endure loss, we need those to imitate, we need others to come after and imitate us, we need reprimanding when we can't get along, we need to be reminded, whatever, that God is near. And in the beginning, and in our end, is Grace. Grace bookends the whole letter to the church. It's the core of what it means to be church.

And in this grace, Paul has found the secret of contentment. And that secret is Christ. Theologian Fred Craddock writes, "[Paul] is able to live with abundance, but it is not necessary that he have it. He is able to live in hunger and want, but it is not necessary that he be poor. He is defined neither by wealth nor poverty but by a contentment that transcends both and by a power in Christ which enables him to live in any circumstance."³ That is why you'll see a smile on the face of a Rwandan orphan, or a Guatemalan child. Or, you or me. The answer is Christ. No Matter What!

¹ Put on Screen here: "Degaje it! Make Life Work"

² Williamson, David, excerpted from *The Christian Century*, June 29, 2004.

³ Craddock, Fred B., "Interpretation Bible Commentary Series: Philippians," p. 78.

Jason wrote a challenge to us in his newsletter this week, as we prepare for the Lenten Season beginning with Ash Wednesday this week. Why not give gifts? Think of ways that you can “give up” something that you tend to enjoy or indulge in, and begin to collect that money together in a giving jar. Come Easter Sunday, give it all to Missions, so that it can continue to be given as gift to others. Extend grace. Stanley Hauerwas writes, “It is the way the world knows what it means for a community to be true, to be honorable, to be just, and even to be pure.” In showing signs of peace to a broken world, that’s what makes church Church! (p. 82)

Finally, even though in prison, Paul believes, trusts, and loves the God of all power and might and glory. And the church extends to him gifts and grace in his time of need. And, it does really help! It’s like winter in Boone that lasts way too long. We can survive. It’s a season that we’re in, but it helps to receive unexpectedly that first splash of Spring! After waiting for many dreary days. Like the first flower in bloom, you rejoice in its beauty! I remember the first time we strolled our oldest down the path of a rose garden at Lake Junaluska. He was a little over a year old, and our firstborn, so everything we did with him was a “first!” He noticed the beautiful roses, and smiled. As parents, we were thrilled of course that a rose brought a smile to his face, and we proceeded to stuff his nose in front of the rose for him to *smell* it! That’s when it hit us. He didn’t know roses had smell! His eyes got wider than we’d ever seen, and he was taken aback by the power of the smell. A smell he had not anticipated nor expected. But, lovely.

Maybe that’s what this book of Philippians has been for us. Maybe it’s that “rose” for us in the Bible. A beautiful letter with quotes that pierce our hearts with love and strength. But our gift from Paul, is that he showed us that the rose has always been within reach, our gift of reading this book together, has enabled us to smell it for the very first time! That’s the power of what I pray our gift to one another, and to the world around us can be. Joy! In the midst of any season, is within our reach. Degaje! Make Life Work. Showing one another the path to Christ, by example, by confronting, by loving, by coming together, by getting along, by imitating Christ, by pressing on toward the goal in Christ Jesus, by thinking on things that are true, noble, honorable, just, and pure, by grace, shall we continue this journey together, on our way, always on our way, to arriving, until God's Kingdom Come. Amen.