

16th Sunday after the Pentecost Sept. 20, 2020

Trinity United Methodist Church

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This may be a good chance for you to pull out your Bibles at home, or maybe even bring your Bibles to church. Because the readings you are going to hear are a Contemporary Translation that Professor N.T. Wright put together himself and published as part of his Kingdom New Testament. He went into some detail about his translation techniques that I'm NOT going to bore you with but it may be useful for you to hear his Translation, side-by-side with your own Favorite Bible. Let's dive in:

Scripture Reading Philippians 1: 1 – 11

1 From Paul and Timothy, slaves of King Jesus,

to all God's holy ones in King Jesus who are in Philippi,
with the overseers and ministers:

2 grace to you and peace, from God our father and the Lord Jesus the king.

3 I thank my God every time I think of you!

4 I always pray with joy, whenever I pray for you all,

because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.

6 Of this I'm convinced:

the one who began a good work in you
will thoroughly complete it by the day of King Jesus.

7 It's right for me to think this way about all of you.

You have me in your hearts, here in prison as I am,
working to defend and bolster up the gospel.

You are my partners in grace, all of you!

Yes: God can bear witness how much I'm longing for all of you
with the deep love of King Jesus.

And this is what I'm praying:

that your love may overflow still more and more,
in knowledge and in all astute wisdom.

Then you will be able to tell the difference between good and evil,
and be sincere and faultless on the day of the Messiah,

11 filled to overflowing with the fruit of right living,

fruit that comes through King Jesus to God's glory and praise.

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The words of God for the people of God.

Thanks be to God.

Message *Philippians—Choice?*

At first, I thought I would focus in on the 'fruit of right living' that is part of that last verse:

Then you will be....filled to overflowing with the fruit of right living, fruit that comes through King Jesus to God's glory and praise. You may be familiar with the Fruits of the Spirit, from Paul's letter to the Galatians: Love, Joy, Peace, Patience, Kindness, Goodness, Faithfulness, Gentleness, Self-Control.

We all need more of those things, don't we? And wouldn't the world be a so much greater place if more people were cultivating those fruits in their own lives rather than arguing, complaining, being crabby and pushy and self-centered?

And maybe later, as we go along, I will come back to these fruits of the Spirit. But first, there is some foundational information that is important for all of us to know as we read Paul's letter to the Philippians.

Like for example: The very first verse. The way that Paul introduces himself at the very beginning needs some attention. He announces himself, as was the custom for letter writing at that time, saying:

From Paul and Timothy, slaves of King Jesus...

If I had to guess, I imagine that many of your Bibles at home say 'servants of Christ Jesus' rather than 'slaves of King Jesus.' Am I right about that?

If you happen to be reading the New Living Translation, you would see the word slave instead of servant.

If you are reading the New Revised Standard Version, servant is in the body of the text but there is a footnote that says: Greek for 'slaves.'

But for 7 or 8 of the other translations I looked at...the word Slave was replaced with the word Servant.

What is that all about?

Those of you who may be trying to understand the racial protests that are going on right now in our country may have seen how 'slavery' is a hot button topic. Am I right? So let me clarify right here and now...Slavery in America, back in the day starting with the 1600s was very different from Slavery in the Roman Empire...

Slavery in Paul's time was an economic transaction that was available to people who ran out of other options. Maybe they lost their land because of drought. Maybe their business went under. Maybe they had a crazy son who gambled away all their money. Selling oneself into slavery was an option, if you could arrange it, that kept people from becoming homeless. And, with that option, came the opportunity to buy oneself out of slavery.

Human nature being what it is, no doubt there were abusive situations where slaves were kept from getting their freedom. People captured in battle were enslaved as captives and perhaps not given an opportunity for freedom. So being a slave in Paul's time was not something that people were proud of...but it was also not something that had to be a permanent, generation to generation kind of thing. Being a slave in Paul's time was not tied to the color of one's skin. Or the country of one's birth. It was just one little cog in the wheel of the economy...and I'm sure it had its downside and mistreatment and loss of status but it was not a life-sentence.

I hope you all understand that when African people were brought to the North American continent...it was not a choice. And they definitely did not have options. The slavery practiced in the history of this part of the world broke the previous historical molds

because the slavery in our history was tied to Race, to skin color, to country of origin and did carry from one generation to the next with no legal or economic options for manumission, redemption. That's a reality and is being talked about a lot these days.

Did you ever wonder why in the history of slavery these last 400 years, white people were never ever allowed to be slaves? That wasn't an option even if it might have made some economic sense. It was established early in the colonies, by law, with the approval of Christians, interpreting the words of the Bible to their own advantage...that African, dark-skinned, Negro people deserved to be slaves. That's all that they were capable of. Some white slave owners actually believed that God created Black people to be instruments of labor—ceaseless, drudgery, day in and day out work without pay. And white people were better than them and had a God given right to own them as property, from birth to earth. From womb to tomb. Even though the Bible tells us that we are all made in the image of God.

The Greek word, 'douloi' is used in the earliest manuscripts of the Philippian letter. It is a word that consistently referred to slaves, in the writings handed down to us from the ancient world.ⁱ I suspect that tragic history of degrading the human worth of African people on this Continent and in Central and even South America may be why so many Bible translations into English use the word 'servant' rather than 'slave' in this opening verse of Philippians. But maybe translators don't want to use the word 'slave' for English speaking readers because they just couldn't believe that Paul would put himself in the position that North American slaves found themselves in. Who would ever willingly choose to be treated as a beast of burden, deemed unfit for education, called out as unworthy to even share a bathroom or a drinking fountain or a swimming pool? That's not something anyone would want for themselves and it certainly is not something that God wants for any of us. Something to think about.

In their time, though, Paul and Timothy call themselves slaves of Jesus because they have chosen to commit themselves to faithfulness and even to prison and death because Jesus has made that same offering to them. Paul and Timothy have named and claimed their relationship with Jesus to be as tight and committed as that of a slave—giving up the freedom of this world and choosing the greater glory of being a follower and friend of Jesus. Paul and Timothy must have also known that they had the freedom, the option to turn their back on Jesus. To claim the freedom of going their own way. But they chose not to do that. Even knowing that the community around them may look down on them, they chose to look up to Jesus and they call themselves slaves of Jesus.

This was not a new concept at the time. Paul and Timothy were also drawing on a rich and ancient tradition of the Jewish writings where the greatest honor, the finest life is to be a 'douloi' slave/servant of God. That was an honorable calling.ⁱⁱ King David was a 'servant/slave' of God. The Psalms also use that imagery to describe a faithful and God centered life.

So as we continue reading the letter to the Philippians, remember that it is being written by Paul, a man who had status, education and prestige in the Roman Empire. He was a citizen and came from money and had held high positions in the Temple hierarchy.

But he turned away from all of that to share the love of Jesus Christ with those around him. Slavery to Jesus was not a burden to Paul. It was a gift, a treasure. An honor.

An honor that got him put in prison...did you notice that part of the reading?

*You have me in your hearts, here in prison as I am,
working to defend and bolster up the gospel.*

You are my partners in grace, all of you!

Yes, Paul is a prisoner. A slave to Jesus and prisoner of the Empire. Not a place that many of us aspire to. But the fact that he names and claims his position in life really does give him some credibility, doesn't it? He's not afraid. He's not self-conscious. He's going about the business of *defending and bolstering up/strengthening the gospel*. He's choosing that for himself, and choosing it with joy. And gratitude. He writes things that are completely out of character for what we would expect a slave and a prisoner to express...

3 I thank my God every time I think of you!

*4 I always pray with joy, whenever I pray for you all,
because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.*

Paul is joyful, in spite of it all. And during the times in which we live...we who are neither a slave or a prisoner...this letter is a challenge for us to find joy. To choose joy rather than despair. And to ask God to grow these fruits of the Spirit within us.

We can choose to be convinced, as Paul is: That...

*the one who began a good work in you
will thoroughly complete it by the day of King Jesus.*

We can choose, or if that's too strong a word, we can pray, as Paul does:

*that our love may overflow still more and more,
in knowledge and in all astute wisdom.*

Isn't it reassuring to know that knowledge and wisdom are available to us as we make decisions going forward?

This letter to the Philippians reminds us that Paul's prayer and the power of God's grace:

...will make us able to tell the difference between good and evil, and be sincere...

Isn't it comforting to know that we can turn to God to help us clear away the fog and name the goodness. Acknowledge the evil around us and sincerely live as those who are loved by God.

Paul is absolutely convinced that God is listening to his prayer for the Philippians and for us to be *filled to overflowing with the fruit of right living,*

fruit that comes through King Jesus to God's glory and praise.

Yes. Go for the fruit...the fruit of the Spirit that God is so eager to give us. Choose to make good use of them! In the name of Jesus. Amen.

ⁱ New Interpreters Bible Commentary, Vol. XI, p. 480. Morna D. Hooker as author. Nashville, Abingdon Press, 2000.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.