

October 8, 2017

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Philippians 1:18b-27

We Want to Magnify Christ by Life and by Death

Rev. George Ferch

Dear friends in Christ Jesus,

They told us at the Seminary that for some Christians it would be hard to die. The one thing I don't remember them telling us is that other Christians would find it a challenge to live. They had lived a long life and were tired, or their short life was filled with pain and sorrow. In either case, these children of God who trusted their heavenly Father were ready to go home. They just cannot understand why their Lord does not take them which is better by far.

You know it is better by far to die and be with Christ in heaven. You also know that to live no matter the circumstances is Christ; everything we do is to elevate our Savior, enlarge Jesus before the world. That is not always the easier of the two, is it? Thus the tension which exists in our Christian experience. We are not the first. The apostle Paul was "torn between the two." Either way, Paul fully expected and hoped that he would courageously "exalt," or, magnify God in his body.

Is this not the theme of our confession? **We Want to Magnify Christ by Life and by Death.** It may be more necessary to remain in the body. Though it is better by far to depart and be with Christ.

Since you are here, even though you want to die and be with Christ, it is more necessary to remain in the body. Your Lord has things for you to experience yet, and to do. Whatever has happened to you will lead to your deliverance so you may continue to magnify God with your bodies. Remember the Virgin Mary after getting news that would make her a shame before others singing what we call the Magnificat, which means, "magnifies," "as in "My soul magnifies the Lord. "

The apostle was pretty sure the Lord would deliver him from the chains of his house arrest in Rome. This was not wishful thinking. Paul relied on the Philippians' prayers on his behalf. He relied on the Holy Spirit's help. Paul not only expected to be saved from his current circumstance but he also was able to say, "Yes, and I will continue to rejoice."

It is difficult for us Christians to live at times, let alone continue to rejoice. We have experienced the reality of the disciples' message to the believers in Asia Minor, "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God."[Acts 14:22] Those trials are God given opportunities to exalt him in our bodies. The weaker we are the more God's strength elevates him. The more our human wisdom fails us, the more God magnifies Christ who is the wisdom of God in our hearts.

To go on living means fruitful labor for us as it did for our spiritual father. Paul would be able to continue the Philippians' progress and joy in the faith. Their joy in Christ would increase. Paul did not know if he would be able to see them again, or just hear about them in the future. He did trust that should he live it would be because God had purpose for him; to exalt God in his body and to help these believers.

To live is Christ. God asks us to live in the most varied circumstance. We trust he will use the prayer of our fellow believers and the help of the Spirit to deliver us for fruitful labor that magnifies Christ in our bodies. That labor includes preparing for the future, raising a family, working at a job, talking with the neighbor over the back fence, enduring tribulations and pains of all sorts. It includes persecution and rejection by the unbelieving world. Every time life presses us down, and we courageously live and rejoice, we exalt, we magnify Christ.

This is part of that tension that tears at us as it did Paul, literally, presses down on us. It may be necessary to remain in the body. Though it is better by far to depart and be with Christ.

It is because of the Holy Spirit's work in our hearts that we affirm the truth of the apostle's inspired truism, "For to me, to live is Christ, to die is gain." Everything we do in life centers on Christ, God's Chosen One, who died on the cross to give us life. Christ then rose from the dead so that in my justification my death is my greatest gain.

How often do you consciously think about the relationship between Christ's resurrection and your death? Paul certainly did. As he faced the possibility of his death which did not come until his later imprisonment he looked

upon death as great gain, or advantage. This pressure between living in Christ and dying in Christ moved him honestly to express, "Yet, what shall I choose? I do not know."

We do not always know, do we? On the one hand there is nothing better than leaving this world of sin and sorrow to be in heaven and see Jesus Christ face to face. It is better by far and great gain to be in the New Jerusalem where there are no more tears, or temptation, or loss. Still, we rejoice and continue to rejoice in our fruitful labor with family, coworkers, and brothers and sisters in Christ.

"Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of Christ." Conduct yourselves literally means "be a citizen." Be a citizen of the kingdom of God that exalts Christ rather than self. A life worthy of Christ lives in a manner in keeping with the magnitude of the gospel. Great is God's love for us in the sacrifice of his Son as our Substitute under the law and under death.

Great is our sacrifice as we continue in fruitful labor worthy of the gospel of Christ. What could magnify Christ more in my body than to look forward to that redeemed body being changed from mortal to immortal on account of his resurrection? To live centers entirely on Christ. To die centers entirely on Christ. Either way, we want to magnify Christ by life and by death. Amen. <SDG>