

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“On Your Marks: Partners in Gratitude”

Rev. Mark Lampley

Psalm 55:16-17 and Philippians 2:14-18

January 1, 2023

Indeed, God graciously hears our complaints: morning, noon, and night. But, what about when we want to complain to each other? Let’s talk about that.

Last Sunday’s New Testament Scripture reading was in the middle of Philippians 2. Pastor Jay noted the shepherds, angels, and all who saw the babe wrapped in clothes and laying in a manger...they move on after seeing him. They returned to normal life as we must do after these holidays. They re-engaged, but empowered with the wonderful message of God sending Jesus to the world!

In the midst of this, Paul uses the language of “**working out** your salvation with **fear and trembling.**” Christians “work out” by carrying the good news to larger and larger audiences. Out to those who need to hear it. Those hurting, grieving, lonely, lost; those needing a Wonderful Counselor.

We do this with **fear and trembling** because we can’t be strong witnesses without God’s help. We enlarge the circle of good news confident that God, who began a good work in us, will carry it out to completion.

"**Trembling**" here can also refer to a shaking due to weakness; like when you’re exercising-laying on your back with your feet slightly up-eventually you quiver and shake because you need stronger abdominal muscles. This is a weakness because we’re in need. A spiritual weakness brings us to a deeper state of dependency on God. We *tremble* in faith because we know we need God more deeply in our lives than before. I give thanks for how our congregation exemplifies this life of faith. So many deepening their dependency by investing time and effort.

This communal effort of “working out salvation” is essentially Christian formation. This is a corporate affair. It is what we do when we are making time: to be in small group Bible studies, in Christian fellowship breaking bread together, and in worship as we pray, listen, give, and sing together.

Discipling ourselves in this way reminds us how to remain on the right path and to show others The Way. To be a bright light. God's light draws people to the path, out of the darkness, and from death to life.

Christians have always had the privilege and responsibility to be: a light on a hill, a beacon of hope, a witness to those who didn't keep last year's resolution even for a day, and those who have felt like a failure in many ways. We continue on our journey of faith, even though it can be challenging. We pursue being like God's Son because it meets the needs around us. "Whatever we do, we are to conduct ourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel."

Today's New Testament reading is Philippians 2:14-18. Listen for God's Word.

"¹⁴ Do all things without murmuring and arguing, ¹⁵ so that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine like stars in the world. ¹⁶ It is by holding fast the word of life that I can boast on the day of Christ that I did not run in vain or labor in vain. ¹⁷ But even if I am being poured out as a libation over the sacrifice and the service of your faith, I am glad, and I rejoice together with all of you; ¹⁸ in the same way you also should be glad and rejoice with me."

The Word of the Lord, ***thanks be to God!***

Paul gives a ***pep talk*** with athletic imagery to keep the community spirit high. A motivational speech to spur them on in faith. Many classic sports movies have copied this. For example, you may remember: the Notre Dame football movie with the stadium's janitor "Rudy" Ruettiger (who imitated a passionate locker room pep talk from a coach), or the Olympic ice hockey movie called "Miracle" (with Kurt Russel pumping up the athletes to overcome Russia for the gold medal), or the Scottish runner Eric Liddle in "Chariots of Fire". He gave his all and collapsed!

After Liddle beat everyone, he said, "I want to compare faith to running a race. It's hard, requires concentration of will, energy of soul. I have no formula for winning the race. Everyone has to run their own way." And where does the power come from to see the race to its end? From faith within.

Jesus said, "If, with all your heart, you seek me, you will surely find me." - if you commit yourself to the love of Christ. And THAT is how to run the straight race.

Paul urges believers to persist through the struggle, pain, and weakness. Hear me out, there's a place for reporting and counseling, but when it comes to communal living, we are to go through it without grumbling or complaining! No murmuring or arguing because we are to be a witness. To consider the needs of others above our own circumstances.

When has complaining ever been something that attracted people to hear more about what you'd say? We want to behave so that others want to hear more about God. To hear our testimony of God's gift of Jesus in our lives. We want to be light-bearers that attract others to God's message, to be children of God without blemish, to lift up God's "only begotten Son that whosoever believes in Him will not perish, but have eternal life." We are the light of Christ among those who are in need of help.

In Paul's context, there were hurting and hesitant people in need of inspiration and motivation. Paul wrote Philippians about 20-30 years after Jesus willingly gave up his life on the cross, so we would have life. Jesus had been mocked, banged up, battered, bruised, stabbed, and killed, but surprisingly Jesus rose from the dead and ascended into heaven.

With Jesus' best come-back story ever told, Christianity expanded rapidly. The good news was carried out because people like you and me talked about the difference God made in their lives.

Knowing that followers were enduring hardships, Paul tried to cheer on the Jews in Philippi. Things had gotten really bad. During this period, Nero was a corrupt and perverse emperor in Rome. In 64 AD, when the fire destroyed much of Rome, Nero intended to rebuild his new palace on the site of the burned quarters, seizing a good deal of private property for the state. To avoid charges, Nero shifted the blame to the Christians. It is reported that Nero gruesomely burned Christians alive, using them as human torches during his chariot races. Winners of the races often got prizes like money or wreaths of leaves. Paul wrote to anxious, frightened believers to remind them that their citizenship was in heaven where earthly prizes had no value.

While we don't have extreme persecution nowadays, God has given us the gift of his Son, who meets all our needs. With that gift, we can be glad to share! To shine like stars in the world. Be light in the darkness, thus we will not run or labor in vain.

Last winter, I came across uplifting help from an unexpected place. It came from faith within children. There is a kindergarten class north of San Francisco that runs its own free phone hotline. They call it “Peptoc.” P-E-P-T-O-C. The number, in case you’re interested, is (707) 8- PEPTOC or numerically (707) 873-7862. The creative teachers who originated Peptoc were inspired to do so after witnessing how their young students kept a positive attitude in the face of hard times. After these kids had been through the COVID, California wildfires, and changes in their family’s circumstances, they remained hopeful, positive, and energetic. The teachers thought more people needed to learn from these wise children. When you call Peptoc, you will hear the following options: “If you're feeling mad, frustrated, or nervous, press 1. If you need words of encouragement and life advice, press 2. If you need a pep talk from kindergartners, press 3.” Eg. pressing any of these options will connect you to recordings of positive, encouraging kindergartners. “If you need to hear kids laughing with delight, press 4. For encouragement in Spanish, press 5.” Within two days after launching the hotline last winter, they were up to 700 callers per hour. Out of the mouths of babes and infants, God proves his worthiness.

Paul’s pep talk to keep the community spirit high was meeting the needs of those struggling. God hears our prayers morning, noon, and night. God’s Son helps envision a bright future, a new day ahead where faith overcomes fear.

Don’t just *believe* that Jesus was born Christ the King, the Son of Mary. Have *faith* that Jesus can be born in us anew and within someone that needs to hear about him. Have *faith* that meets the needs of those around us, for it’ll foster gratitude.

Knowing in our mind that Jesus was born in Bethlehem is only part of the reason to keep celebrating during the holidays. Knowing in our hearts that he is worth completely surrendering to is another. To KNOW Him is to die to self, that we may live. That we may be a good example, a light for others that need it.

Whether we serve in Latin America or North America, or wherever we hear God’s message, we are partners commissioned to go back to “normal life” confident that God’s Holy Spirit and Light work within us.

Rejoice and be glad in God’s overwhelming love, which doesn’t end when we flip over the calendar. Let your new year’s resolution be “meeting others’ needs and fostering gratitude”!