

Philippians 1:20-30
Stay or Go?
Sunday September 24th, 2017

When you first read this it sounds as if Paul is suicidal! Vs. 21 reads, “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.” And vs. 23 reads, “I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far;” In my training as a pastoral counselor both these statements coming so close together would bring up red flags.

But in my experience, and the older I have gotten, and the more I have worked with older people the more I have heard statements like this, and questions like such as this. Why am I still here? Why do I have to suffer like this, or why does my loved one have to be in that condition? Why doesn't God just call me home?

I have had many conversations like this, on this topic, with my mom the most recent of which was last Sunday. She said, “I am so useless. My whole life consists of this bed. Why can't I go home to God? She then looked beside her to my bedbound dad and said, “Who would take care of him?” Why can't we just go together?

To which I replied in my most trained and pastoral way, “Mom, unless a plane falls on this place, you both probably won't go at the same time.” She said, “I know, I know, I just wish.”

My mom and I, as well as our whole family, have a strange sense of humor and somewhat dark. Recently she developed Macular degeneration in her left eye and has gone almost blind in that eye. Macular degeneration was her biggest fear in old age. She asked me for an eye patch to see if that would help her see better with her one good eye. I kidded her, and said to her, “Do you want a parrot and hook to go with it? (and yes she did laugh)!

There is a lot of pain and indignity that goes with growing old that a sense of humor and faith can help us with, because the effects of aging bring many to the point of despair.

Many older people I work with struggle with similar issues of pain, failing bodies, lack of purpose and sometime verbalize a desire to end it all.



I believe our scripture today can help us with this. It was written by Paul while he was in prison in Rome. He was waiting to be put on trial with a very likely outcome being him condemned to death. Paul suffered much in his mission for the Gospel of Jesus Christ. 2 Cor. 11:24-25 tell us of part of his suffering in his own words, “Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods,

once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea,..”

Most people did not survive the 39 lashes once much less 5 times. And this is just a short list of what he suffered for Christ. Scholars have said that by this time in his life, he would have looked far older than his age, bent, gnarled, disfigured by the lashes and beatings and the deep scars they left. And then there was his thorn in the flesh. And his deep concern for his churches. The list goes on and on of physical, emotional and spiritual sufferings of Paul.

But Paul had an intimate daily relationship with Jesus that began face to face on the road to Damascus and deepened ever time Jesus saw him through a trial. And the relationship was so deep and so present that Paul couldn't help but to desire to see its fulfilment in Heaven when he would again see Jesus face to face.

Now a story is told of a group of children in a Sunday School class who were once quizzed after studying “salvation by faith” on what it took to get to heaven. The teacher asked, “If I give all I have to the church will that get me into heaven?” The class shouted no! If I do all sorts of good things for others will that get me into heaven? The class shouted

no! If you are good to your brothers and sisters will that get you into heaven?

Now before the rest could shout “no”, one little boy could stand it no longer. He jumped up and shouted, “I know. I know! You gotta die!”

So what kept Paul here? Why didn't Paul just end it all and go home to God? He could have insulted the Roman Magistrate and that would have been it. Well, first of all Paul knew his ending was solely in the hands of God, and secondly, and most importantly, he had a deep love for his churches, his brothers and sisters in Christ who he knew needed him. As he wrote in vs. 24, **“but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.”** ‘The decisive factors here were the needs of others and the progress of the Gospel and not his own personal preferences.’ NIB Vol. XI p. 493



And so Paul did not care if he was convicted and condemned to death by an earthly Roman court. He wanted to be acclaimed in the heavenly court by God the Father. He knew that if he lived, or died, whatever happened, it would be best for his churches and the Gospel, because it was God's plan. So his prayer was that no matter what happened, how much he suffered, he would remain faithful to the Gospel.

That is why he said in vs. 20 b, **“but (I) will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.”**

Now in vs 27 a shift happens from Paul talking about living, life and death... to **suffering**. Verse 27 reads, **“Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.”**

Now we are all familiar with the thought that we are baptized into Jesus' death and resurrection. When we are baptized we die in Christ and are raised with Christ through faith to eternal life. But have you ever

thought much about how we are also baptized into Christ's suffering?
We are baptized into Jesus' life, death, suffering and resurrection.

This is a profound thought, **"A Christian's sufferings are in reality Christ's suffering and thus share in the redemptive work of Christ."** NIB Vol. XI
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If we live righteous lives in peace we exalt Christ, and thus witness to Christ, and if we suffer with courage and faith we too exalt Christ. Paul says be ready for whatever comes.

Why do we suffer? Life today is full of hurricanes, earthquakes, fires, politics, political news casts, disease, death, old age and witness for Jesus Christ. Yes, we suffer because of all of these things. If we claim the name of Christ we will suffer.

Now in America rarely do we suffer physically, but we suffer often from wrong expectations of God and our faith. A theologian wrote the following: *"The constant cry, "Why should this happen to me?" implies that God has let us down. We expect God to reward us for our allegiance and to save us from all trials and tribulations.*

The Christian gospel offers no such hope. What it does offer is the assurance that whatever happens, the Christian who trusts in God will not be let down by God or be put to shame. Whatever experiences we undergo, we may confidently expect to find Christ sharing them with us, and so we discover that disaster leads to new opportunity, sorrow to joy, and death to resurrection." NIB Vol. XI p. 494

Our earthly suffering should not be seen as abandonment by God, but as an opportunity to witness for God, just like Paul's imprisonment, like his thorn in the flesh, and his eventual martyrdom. Will you stand strong in your faith when, because of the circumstances of your life, even God seems to have abandoned you? When you cry out Psalm 22, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?"

A story is told of an old woman who woke up one more smacked her husband awake and proclaimed, "I must be dead!" Her husband

more than just a little annoyed at being woken up said, “Have you lost your mind old woman? You’re not dead. You are talking to me!” To which the old woman replied, “I must be dead. I know it. I know it. I woke up this morning and nothing hurts!”

Growing old is not for sissies to quote my mom! It hurts. We reach a point in life when our bodies give us more pain than joy. Where if weren’t for doctor’s visits, we wouldn’t go anywhere; where life seems to take away more from us than it gives. But part of Paul’s point here is, “Are you looking for life to be your savior, or are you looking to the source of life: the Christ.” NIB Vol. XI p. 493 Is to live Christ? Is to die not an escape from pain, but the gaining of a perfect union with Christ?

And very practically in terms of happiness in our present life as it is, “Are you looking for your purpose, or are you looking at what life has taken away?” If we focus on our losses it leads to depression. If we look to what we still have, and Christ, it leads to joy in the midst of the pain.

Psalm 71:18 reads, “**Even when I am old and gray, do not forsake me, my God, till I declare your power to the next generation, your mighty acts to all who are to come.**”

On my mom’s 91st birthday in her haste to get to the party she fell and broke her hip. A nurse in the hospital told me, and her, as she lay in the emergency room bed, “Most people her age who break a hip don’t live out a year.” I was so shocked by her insensitivity that I could not speak, which probably was for the best. But as you can imagine then the last two years have been a real struggle with pain and depression. A change in meds helped with the depression, (And here is a side note: our brains are a chemical mix and if it gets out of balance we can get depressed. Sometimes we need a med, sometimes we need a change in meds. It really helped my mom when she changed her depression med.) But what I believe bothers my mom the most is a sense of loss of purpose.

She helped raise her 8 brothers and sisters. She raised me and my brothers and sister. She was active in church, DAR and helped my dad. She now wonders what her purpose is.

Recently, she was very excited to share with me about comforting a fellow resident in their nursing home with scripture, who was terrified of a monsoon storm. She still tries to look out for my dad who is bed bound in hospice care. I talk with her about why she is still here and I assure her God has a purpose.

She helps where she can. Friday I shared with her that she and my dad have taught me of the indignities of aging and how to accept them as gracefully as we can. This has helped me in my pastoral work.

You never know what good you might do with a simple word of witness to your faith; courage in the face of pain, and even death. Family, friends, neighbors, coworkers and loved ones need to hear words of comfort and faith, and what a powerful witness it is if you can give these words through and despite your own pain and suffering. Simple statements like: "I will pray for you. God loves you and I love you."

Or you can share memories of your faith and church and how that brought you comfort and courage. It is ok and very appropriate to say, "I remember when Jesus did... for me."

And remember you can even use being old as an excuse for boldness with younger family and friends who don't know God and whose lives are not lived in righteousness. You know how it works, just say, "Humor me. I am old and have seen a lot. You need to get right with God," or whatever witness you want. Use your senior status. You have your AARP card or AMAC.

Now verse 29 is hard or impossible to comprehend unless you are living your life for others and Christ's mission. **"For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him,"**

Yes, you heard it right. Your suffering is a gift from God. Just like our faith, our suffering here on earth can be a gift, if we suffer with faith and courage, if we turn our suffering into a witness for God. If you suffer through the indignities of old age with courage, faith and joy, knowing like Paul, that eventually death will be gain, it can be a ferocious witness.

And so remember this, **“A Christian’s sufferings are in reality Christ’s suffering and thus share in the redemptive work of Christ.”** NIB Vol. XI
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So hang in there. Hang together in your faith as a church. As Paul wrote, **“Stand firm in the one Spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the gospel.”**

And it’s ok to long for our forever home in heaven while here on earth, but remember until God calls you home, God still has something for you to do. He has a purpose for you even in your suffering.

In Jesus’ name Amen.