Prayer in Times Like These

March 15, 2020

The previous weeks have brought us daily, and even hourly, updates as we track the progress of a virus that has gripped the world, escalating to declarations of national emergencies and a global pandemic. Financial markets are on a roller coaster. Schools and public spaces are closing. Major sporting events are cancelled. Lower 48 stores have empty shelves due to a stampede run on some pretty essential essentials. Even the Happiest Place on Earth and the Magic Kingdom are closed. And who knows when we will see a cruise ship. So, how are you feeling this morning? Or should I say, how are you *reeling* this morning?

Whether you’ve been on the worry wagon for awhile, or are just now getting on board, it’s clear that this is a big deal for Skagway. While some of us may breathe a small sigh of relief to no longer be in the work force, we all have family and friends who will be hurt by the delayed start to our season, who have looked forward to the return of summer income after a long winter. We all support local businesses who are, or soon will be, losing a boat-load of money. Love ‘em or hate ‘em, we depend on those ships.

Today as we look at Paul’s letter to the Philippians, specifically at his prayer in chapter 1, you probably remember the Philippian letter as brimming with thankfulness, joy and rejoicing. According to Earl Palmer, a retired Presbyterian pastor and scholar, this is a letter of sheer encouragement. We could use some of that today, couldn’t we?

Paul is writing to them from jail, and he shares how when he remembers them, he always prays with joy for them. Paul established this church after responding to a vision to go to Macedonia (Acts 16), and they had maintained a close relationship over the years. He is encouraged by thoughts and memories of his Christian friends. In other letters Paul writes of their generosity to him and others. And later in this letter, we read that they had sent one of their members to him, Epaphroditus, sent to take care of Paul’s physical and financial needs while in prison. While helping Paul, Epaphroditus became sick and almost died, but now that he’s recovered Paul thinks it best for him to return home. The illness Epaphroditus suffered is our providential silver lining, since Paul might not have taken the opportunity to pen this letter of thanks if all had gone smoothly for Epaphroditus. It also encourages me to look for the silver linings in the midst of our current situation, and to be ready to point them out to others. More on that later.

Paul is thankful, joyful and encouraged because together they are a fellowship, they are on board with his message and mission, they share a partnership in the gospel, a kingdom partnership of good work that God began and continues to sustain (v. 5). At times it’s likely been risky for them to support him openly and financially, but they have hung in there.

In a sermon Earl Palmer preached on this chapter (*Paul’s Prayer for his Friends)*, he explains another reason Paul rejoices. It’s not a part of our reading today, it’s in verse 19. But it really spoke to me in light of where we are right now, as we hear Paul say: *Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and God’s provision of (or the help of) the Spirit of Jesus Christ what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance.* Here Paul is rejoicing for two things working together, their intercessory prayers and, depending on the translation you’re using, for the provision, or the help, of the Holy Spirit. Here’s what stood out to me when I read Palmer’s sermon: he notes that the Greek word for help used in verse 19 is *epichoragia*. From the root of this word we get our English words *chorus, chorale* and *choreography*. Paul is telling us that God is the master choreographer of our lives and prayers, that he choreographs our prayers and our lives to the good benefit of the world around us (p.174, E. Palmer, *Prayer Between Friends*). In this case, it gave Paul hope and joy during his imprisonment.

After gushing for a couple of verses, Paul transitions in verses 9 through 11 to what his prayer of intercession is for them: to grow and mature in a love that is wrapped up in knowledge.

* It is a *wide knowledge*, as in having a broad, well-informed knowledge, like what a student needs when preparing for multiple exams covering a wide range of classes. The opposite would be ignorance. For awhile some may have remained ignorant regarding the coronavirus, but we want that knowledge now.
* It is a *deep knowledge*, to have insight, such as knowing not only what a word says but also what it means. Three points here:
  + Bible studies and small groups are places where we can come together to explore not only what a passage says, but also what we think it means, to share our ideas, to sharpen each other and dig deeper.
  + We have been digging deeper into our mission statement – who are we, and what are our core values. The church doors don’t have locks, but when we say we are a church of open doors, is there a deeper meaning? If so, what do we think it is? That’s a way of pursuing deeper knowledge.
  + Right now the fields of science and medicine are focused on digging deeper to know how to combat the Coronavirus. – learning more, getting to know it
* It is also a *knowledge that is discerning*. Earl Palmer’s take on this is that Paul means, one that uses common sense, or street knowledge. It’s knowing how long to say grace while the food is getting cold and everyone is getting restless. When to give someone space, or when to not leave them alone. And not buying all the toilet paper. Consistent living inside and out.

We’ve all seen the sign, we know it by heart – worry is a waste of imagination. Worry is also a waste of the deep knowledge of our hope in Christ, and the powerful provision and help of the Holy Spirit. We need to remember that powerful help that made Paul rejoice, the choreography of the Holy Spirit in each of us.

And so I encourage you to pray for your relationship with the Holy Spirit to build and grow:

* So we can stand together, trusting that God is in control, and not panic when events and oppositions come our way. Near the end of this chapter, in verse 28, Paul encourages the Philippians to be united and not to panic at events around them. The Greek word he uses is not to be startled, not to be like a herd of horses that gets spooked and stampedes when the unexpected happens.
* So we can recognize the Spirit prompting us to push past boundaries and reach out to others. Last week Ryan talked about the power of the Holy Spirit, and how we limit that power with boundaries that hold us back, much like a car that has a governor that won’t allow it to exceed a certain speed. My son, Beau, stopped by a couple of days ago to talk through how he anticipates his life will be impacted with no ships for an unknown time. He’s trimming non-essentials and trying to prepare, but I know he is a little freaked out. As we talked, I felt a stirring to ask him if I could pray for him, but I didn’t. I wasn’t sure if he was in a receptive place, if it was what he needed at that moment (as if there is ever a time when we don’t need prayer). But before he left, I used that prompting to tell him that I’ve been praying for him and our town, as I’m sure many of you have, and would keep doing so. A little boundary push to remind him that he is loved by God.
* So we can see the silver linings where God is at work, and share our hope with others. About 30 minutes after Beau left, he sent me a text to say he’d received some good news regarding a work situation. He called it a little sunshine on an otherwise dismal day. I replied that it is good to keep our eyes out for those silver linings.
* So, through the power of Christ working in us, we may bear the fruit of right, consistent living that is worked out in our inner life and flows out to our daily walk.

And, I encourage you to pray in partnership with the Holy Spirit. Again, as we look at the choreography of the Holy Spirit in our lives, I share a quote from Palmer (*Courage That Just Happens*): “Have you ever thought of the fact that the Holy Spirit choreographs your prayers? Your prayers have impact. … Paul is sharing with us the mystery of prayer. Think about that – that when you pray, *you become a part* of the choreography of God, that God uses your prayers.” Also, when *we pray together.* So let us be encouraged to lift our prayers of thanksgiving and intercession to God, asking for his choreography in our current and future connections and situations:

* For the sick, especially those with the coronavirus
* For fields of science and medicine, and deeper knowledge of the virus
* For the worried and the fearful
* For leaders at all levels
* For our town and country
* For our world
* For our response as a church