

Our text comes from one of Paul's letters written while in prison to his friends in Philippi in northern Greece. Prison life has caused him to assess what is important to him, what values he holds dear. Apparently being confined against your will and having extra time on your hands, because you can't freely travel all over the country gives the opportunity for a little extra reflection time – who knew? So Paul finds himself a man in the middle, a person who has literally changed his pursuits almost midstride and is quite excited about it. At one time, the apostle Paul spent all his time and resources pursuing and persecuting Christians, establishing a successful career as a devout Pharisee. But now he has changed course so that he spends all his time and resources pursuing Christ. His career is in shambles by society's standards because now he is in jail. However, what looks like a failed career turns out to be an opportunity for Paul to share God's love and the faith of Christ with his fellow prisoners, the prison guards, and ultimately to the church through his letter writing.

If we hop back to chapter 2, Paul writes that when he was living face to face with the Philippians, they lived in responsive obedience to God. But now that they are separated, he wants them to keep up their good work. Better yet, he says, "redouble your efforts... to do everything readily and cheerfully – no bickering, no second-guessing allowed! Be a breath of fresh air in this squalid and polluted society. Provide people with a glimpse of good living and of the living God" (vss. 14-16). In other words, make sure all your words and actions are consistent with the faith you profess. I don't know if you remember the commercials about Las Vegas that used to run before COVID? One had a lawn care man going to the customer to receive payment after he completed the work on the customer's lawn. "That'll be \$75," the lawn guy says. The customer, shocked at the price, replies, "\$75! Last month it was \$30." "Yes," says the worker, "But you know, I was in Vegas this past week, and I had a good time, and I noticed that you were there on one of your supposed work days and you were really enjoying yourself as well." The embarrassed customer stammered, "\$75? Okay, that'll be fine... good job on the lawn!" The caption then flashes on the screen, "What happens here, stays here." But does it, really? Challenging the caption, Paul tries to remind us that our Christianity is not some glossy covering in which to hide certain parts of our lives. Instead, be people of character

so that others can trust what you say and who you are. As St. Francis of Assisi said, "Preach the Gospel at all times; if necessary, use words."

Eugene Peterson's *The Message* gives an insightful translation for chapter 3 saying, "Steer clear of barking dogs, those religious busybodies, all bark and no bite. All they're interested in is appearances- knife-happy circumcisers. The real believers," Paul says, "are the ones the Spirit of God leads to work away at this ministry, filling the air with Christ's praise as we do it." This is the lead-in to our text today, one which is framed and focused on the Greek word "dikaios" (dee-ky-os) which means righteous or righteousness. For Paul, the core of a Christian's identity is to be dee-ky-os, righteous. Paul says, "I didn't want some petty, inferior brand of righteousness that comes from keeping a list of rules when I could get the robust kind that comes from trusting Christ – God's righteousness." Righteousness is a word that can only be understood relationally, in relationship with others, and not individually or in private. Yet it seems that the English translation comes across foreign to so many ears these days. The last several Shasta County Board of Supervisors meetings have been filled, in my opinion, with a whole lot of barking busybodies, committed to wreaking havoc. A group of angry protesters have retaliated with pettiness against the Board for holding firm to the health guidelines from the health officials. Barking that an inferior brand of civil rights have been infringed upon and that COVID is a national hoax, they have leveled threats against the County Health Supervisor to the point she has requested police protection at her home. Last week, a man dressed in a grim reaper costume came into the chambers and tried to light a surgical mask on fire in protest. The faith communities of Shasta Interfaith are saying "enough is enough" and are speaking up on behalf of these county leaders, who are robustly treading through uncharted waters trying to protect the health and safety of all in this lengthy pandemic. Now our county is on the verge of having to escalate health restrictions once more because too many people are focusing on rule-breaking, through gathering without masking, rather than on righteous living which focuses on caring for others. Friends, we are not on a sprint here, we are on a marathon and marathons are never easy. After the President was diagnosed with COVID this week, he tweeted "We will get through this together." It was an honest reaction from someone who finds himself quarantined and possibly reassessing his values, what is truly important in life.

We don't run this marathon alone, we run it together, as a community and a nation, united against a common foe – the virus, not each other. Paul laid out the dynamics of such a marathon as he wrote about living a righteous life, a life modelled by the way Jesus lived. We are either openly running the race supporting each other along the way or we are becoming roadblocks which hinder, even destroy the well-being of not just the community or nation, but ourselves. One county protester experienced the death of his mother due to COVID several weeks back. Rather than accept the coroner and medical professionals' diagnosis, he demanded the death certificate be changed because even in death, he wouldn't face the truth.

Rev. Mark Feldmeier tells a story of driving home one evening and seeing a group of teenagers huddled around a few lighted candles and a makeshift memorial. Something compelled him to pull to the side of the road and join this group of complete strangers. Standing amidst the broken glass and broken hearts, he read the poster board sign in silence. The kid's name was James. "Tell me about James," he asked. They told him what kind of kid he was, what he loved to do, and they told him the story of how James died in a drunk driving accident the previous night. He was 18 and his friend who was driving survived the crash. Some of them were crying, others were angry, while some still couldn't believe their friend was dead. After talking for quite awhile, one of the young adults looked at Mark and said, "I wonder if he kissed his mom before he left the house?" Eighteen years old and he was pondering the mysteries of what is important in his life and the choices he makes. As Eighteen years old, and he's catching a glimpse of eternity, and how close in time we are to it, but how far away we are from a living a life worthy of it, for as the old adage goes, "If you live wrong, it is very hard to die right."

The church at Philippi was disheartened by Paul's imprisonment. They felt distanced and lost without his strength and encouragement. Some of us may know what that feels like, missing family and friends and weary of the safety practices placed upon us. Feeling confined, it may be hard to recognize opportunities and choices still available to us about how we use our time, about how we take up God's call as seen through Christ Jesus to live for the good of each other. One of my favorite Marvin Gaye's songs is "Ain't no mountain high enough," and sure enough some young adults got the great idea in the midst of COVID to rewrite and sing this

song to encourage their family. I want to share it with you as a symbol of righteous living, of creatively working away at this ministry, filling the air with Christ's praise as we do it. (YouTube video <https://youtu.be/x49WPTjw-J8>). There is no mountain high enough, family, to keep me from you, so let us press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.