

LIVE COURAGEOUSLY

Life Together (Part 2)

Text: Philippians 1:12-30

I

As I think about the life of our beloved nation on this Fourth of July weekend, I am more convinced than ever that if we are to overcome the profound conflicts that divide us... If we are to construct a society where more people flourish... If we are to become again a country admired the world over not only for its economy and entertainments, but for its exemplary character... it will require you and me – and many others – to BE the CHURCH in a far more active and faithful way than perhaps we have.

As some of you may know, one of the first and greatest fans of America was a sociologist from France by the name of Alexis de Tocqueville. In the early 1800's, he came to the United States in order to study what made this nation work. The fruits of his research were published in the classic two-volume work, *Democracy in America*. It was a staple of the core curriculum in my Political Science major at Yale, but has largely been forgotten today. It is worth listening again to what de Tocqueville wrote:

*"I sought for the greatness and genius of America in her commodious harbors and her ample rivers, and it was not there; in her fertile fields and boundless prairies, and it was not there; in her rich mines and her vast world commerce, and it was not there. Not until I went to the churches of America and heard her pulpits aflame with righteousness did I understand the secret of her genius and power. America is great because she is good. And if America ever ceases to be good, America will cease to be great."*¹

The vitality of America, de Tocqueville believed, had sprung from the moral vision that got shaped every week in the life of its myriad churches. The genius of America lay in the way that Christians – enflamed by a vision of righteous or right living -- went out to practice that in their domestic, community, and business life and even in the way they did politics.

De Tocqueville went on to describe the vast variety of voluntary associations that the faith of church members spawned. He marveled at the non-profit organizations they founded to address problems, and the works of mercy they extended to meet people in pain or trouble, and the restless way these church people kept working to improve and reform society's systems so that they more closely resembled the kingdom of God. The genius of America, de Tocqueville saw, lay in this essential goodness. *"If America ever ceases to be good,"* he warned, *"America will cease to be great."*

II

This is why this sermon series we are calling LIFE TOGETHER is a timely one indeed. Paul's Letter to the Philippians illumines six crucial callings God has given to the Church... six callings which, if you and I answer them, can help us be the kind of light-reflecting, society-salting, goodness-enhancing force our communities and country desperately needs right now. What we talk about in this series, I hope you'll talk about in your families, with your small group or neighbors, and teach to your kids. It's just that important.

As Lisa and Eric reminded us last week, the first of those callings is to LOVE THE CHURCH. I'm not saying you've got to always love going to church or love everything said or done by church people, or love each aspect of this particular church. Our calling is to love what the Church with a capital "C" is intended to be and to live together toward that -- the way the Apostle Paul did.

Paul was nuts about the Christian Church. One of the main reasons was because he saw believers like you and me as **"holy people" (Phil 1:1)**. Now, when Paul uses the word "holy" there, it's not in the sense of "moral purity." Paul doesn't love the church because it's full of perfect people. Most of us haven't been yet to THAT church! When Paul uses the word "holy" here, he means it not in the sense of moral perfection; but in the sense of being "set apart for God's special purposes."

When I say, LOVE THE CHURCH, I mean, let's start cherishing even more the role you and I have been set apart to play in this world. Paul says, **"I thank God every time I remember you." (Phil 1:3). In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy... WHY?... because of your partnership in [the work of] the gospel" (Phil 1:4)**. It's this that I especially love about YOU too. When I think about how many of YOU are serving God right where you are now... When I remember how you are giving generously to keep the local and global mission of the church going strong... When I think of how you are working to share the gospel message with your kids or grandkids... and praying for your neighbors to come to know Christ... and trying to live as citizens of the Kingdom of God above any social group or political party... Every time I remember you, I think, wow, I LOVE THE CHURCH.

And along with Paul, **This is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight (Phil 1:9)**. My prayer is that you will see how important you and all your fellow believers of every age and race and place are to the work of God in our time. Our willingness to live into our calling as the Church in this day can be just as society-altering as it was in the Philippians' day or in the days of Alexis de Tocqueville. Why? Because, as Chuck Colson once observed: The quality of every CULTure depends on the quality of the "cult" – that is the set and practice of spiritual beliefs – at its center.² America will only be as great as its Church.

III

Which points us to the second dimension of our vocation as Christians in our time. I'm talking about the call to LIVE COURAGEOUSLY. You know, there's a lot you can say about the Apostle Paul and people have said, both positive and negative. But there's one thing most people agree on in their assessment of his life: Paul lived courageously. In his second letter to the Corinthian Church, Paul gives us some detail about what he'd faced as a follower of Jesus in his world: Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Remember that scene from the Passion of the Christ where we see Jesus enduring that torture? How many times did Paul go through that? Five times. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked... I have been in danger from rivers, from bandits, from my fellow Jews, from Gentiles; [I have been] in danger in the city, in the country, at sea; and from false believers. (2 Cor 11:24-26).

In other words, Paul has endured years of hardship, opposition, and even torture. When he writes this Letter to the Philippian Church, Paul is now chained under house arrest in Rome. I reckon YOU know a little bit of what it's like to be confined to your house for months on end and how depressing that is. But listen to how Paul thinks about this experience: **Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel... It has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. And because of my chains, most of the brothers and sisters have become confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear (Phil 1:12-14).**

Paul regards the difficulties in his life not as occasions for despair, but as opportunities to demonstrate a courageous trust in Christ. He prays that the confidence he puts in the Lord will inspire others to live courageously and share the gospel of God's kingdom wherever they are too. **And because of this I rejoice (Phil 1:18)** he says. **I... hope that I will... have sufficient COURAGE so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death (Phil 1:20-21).** And then Paul makes one of his most famous statements ever: **For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain (Phil 1:21).** In other words: *"I'm not sure which is the better deal – dying and going to be with Christ in eternity OR continuing to live on here to serve Christ's gospel purposes in this world."* Whatever serves God best.

Let me pause here and make an observation about the nature of the courage we meet in the Paul, which clearly inspired the Early Church and which, I believe, is needed from the Church in our times. As Franklin D. Roosevelt, once observed: *Courage is not the absence of fear, but rather the assessment that something else is more important.* For St. Paul, the *more important something* was seeing "Christ preached." Paul literally says: **The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached (Phil 1:18).**

Now, when we hear somebody talking about “preaching Christ” we naturally think of someone standing in a pulpit or on a street corner giving a sermon. That’s why most of us count ourselves out of that enterprise immediately. But “preaching Christ” is actually New Testament shorthand for doing anything that helps the saving grace and truth of God take root in human hearts and communities. Paul’s priority wasn’t giving sermons; it was seeing lives transformed by Jesus. Helping that renewal happen was more important to Paul than insisting on his privileges as a Roman citizen or protecting his reputation as a Jewish Pharisee, or preserving his bodily comforts or even his life. Paul probably felt all kinds of natural human fears, but they were overwhelmed by the consuming passion he had to help other people discover and experience the abounding, life-changing, love of Jesus Christ. And so he lived courageously for that.

IV

My closing question is: What if ALL of us did? What if helping more people discover and experience the abounding, life-changing love of Christ became OUR most important thing and we lived toward that with more courage? How might you and I do that? How might we “preach Christ,” personally and practically? Here are two ideas...

First, make a decision that before you die, you are going to help at least two people become intentional followers of Christ who are not right now. In other words, you will replace yourself and you will double that up in order to expand the Church. How can you do that? Start praying regularly for the people you love who aren’t following Christ. Read my book, WITNESS ESSENTIALS, as a primer in how to help others on the faith journey. Invite others to read a book like THE PURPOSE-DRIVEN LIFE or THE REASON FOR GOD and reflect with you over what the book kicks up. Ask a couple of the people you are praying for to dinner with some of your other Christian friends and help them build relationships with others for whom the gospel has been life-giving. When the time is right, invite them to be part of your small group or form one just for them. I know that sounds scary. I wouldn’t ask you to do this if it weren’t something I have done dozens of time, if it weren’t something God calls the Church to do. Live courageously.

Then, second and finally, use your voice in the public square in a way that sounds like Jesus and witnesses to the heart of his kingdom. I think we’ve all noticed that our society is enflamed right now by some pretty intense passions around race, health, and politics. I don’t in any way want to minimize the importance of the underlying issues we are trying to sort out. Not every belief system is equally true or helpful. Not every course of action will build a better society. Not every voice should be accepted without challenge. Maybe not my own.

But when you and I are going on social media, or deciding whether to forward this particular email, or determining how we’ll interact in conversation with someone with whom we strenuously disagree, can we still find the courage to honor and glorify Christ

in the way we deport ourselves? If being white or black or blue... if being progressive, libertarian, or conservative... if being clever or snarky or virtue-signaling feels more significant to us than speaking in a way that reflects Christ's heart and imitates the way he responded even to those who reviled him... then we need to pull back, catch our breath, and think further.

Whatever happens, says Paul, **conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ (Phil 1:27).** I don't pretend that is easy. Let's not deceive ourselves. It takes courage to be the CHURCH – to live in such a way that we draw people into the life of Christ and display the beauty of the kingdom of God. But I don't know a calling more beautiful and more important in this time than being that Church. DeTocqueville was right: America will only be as great as the quality and witness of her Church. Let's BE that Church and pursue a better life together.

Please pray with me...

Lord, make your Church in this country the true home of the brave. Grow in us the courage to pray, learn, engage and act, in a manner that embodies the teaching and practice of Jesus. By the way we dare to live and love, inspire others to leave behind the idolatries and ideologies that are dividing and destroying us, and join us in pursuing Your way. Revive America, Lord, by reviving us. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

¹ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*.

² Chuck Colson & Nancy Pearcey, *How Now Shall We Live?* p. 37.