

So far, 2020 has been a very rough year, and we're only $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way through it.

You know what's been making it so tough:

Partisan politics... polarization... police shootings... protests... pandemic...

That's a lot of words that start with the letter P. You may be tempted to throw a flag: "Personal foul... Excessive alliteration by the preacher..."

But I'm going to double down and say we need some more p-words.

We need perspective. And I think that perspective comes from Paul, and his Epistle to the Philippians.

This week we begin a series of 4 weeks of readings through the highlights of the 4 chapters in Philippians.

And one of the remarkable things about Philippians, and something that's very helpful in our context is yet another p-word: paradoxical. Philippians is written while Paul is in prison. Exactly when and where, we're not sure—there's a ton of scholarly debate about that question. But it's probably later in his ministry.

Paul is imprisoned. And he's facing capital charges. And yet, paradoxically, Philippians is characterized by joy. Paul faces a possible death sentence. And yet, he has an attitude of joy. An amazing paradox.

Can we learn something from Paul's paradoxical perspective as we grapple with pandemic, protests, politics and polarization?

I believe we can. But before dipping into Philippians I also want to pull in the words from our Collect of the Day. We prayed,

"Grant us, Lord, not to be anxious about earthly things, but to love things heavenly; and even now, while we are placed among things that are passing away, to hold fast to those that shall endure..."¹

This is a classic prayer that's been around 1,500 years. There's a wonderful paradox in this prayer as well that goes right along with Philippians.

"Grant us, Lord, not to be anxious about earthly things, but to love things heavenly; and even now, while we are placed among things that are passing away, to hold fast to those that shall endure."

Do you hear that wonderful parallelism?

¹ BCP p. 234

Anxiety about earthly things coupled with the fact that we are placed among things that are passing away. And then loving heavenly things coupled with holding fast to those things that shall endure.

At the risk of adding more p-words, we've got a dichotomy between things that are passing away and things that are permanent.

Thus, we need perspective. Those anxiety producing things in 2020 from pandemic to political polarization, those are all things that are passing away. They are temporal and temporary. They are impermanent.

There's a saying that some people are so heavenly minded that they are no earthly good. The charge is that such people have their heads in the spiritual clouds and they're not grounded to any of the realities in this world.

But I think we face a greater danger in exactly the opposite direction. We're often so tied up with earthly things, and anxiety about earthly things. We desperately need perspective. These are things that are passing away. They may be important, for now. But they are not of ultimate importance. And they are not permanent.

Yes, God created us to live in this world. Yes, we are to be part of this world, to participate in this world. That means that we do have to deal with things like partisan politics and pandemic and polarization.

But, we are also created and called to love heavenly things, to live with hope, to place our minds on the permanent things that will endure. As we stand up and say every Sunday, "We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come."²

Which brings me to Paul's paradoxical perspective in Philippians.

Paul is facing a possible death sentence. Yet, he is filled with joy. Thus, he is genuinely torn about which way he hopes the trial will turn out. If he lives, he can continue to serve Christ. If he dies, he gets to be with Christ. It's a win/win scenario as far as he's concerned. Yet he also realizes that continuing to live and work in this world might be of more benefit to his fellow Christians than his martyrdom would be.

He thinks he actually will beat the charges and be able to continue on with his ministry, so he is hopeful. But he also lives with the larger hope of spending eternity with Jesus Christ in God's eternal and permanent kingdom.

And after sharing that hope with the Philippian Christians, he adds something else.

He tells them not to be overwhelmed or discouraged by the opposition they're facing from the opponents of Christianity.

² BCP p 359

In fact, he describes the Philippians' situation with yet another p-word. He says it is a privilege. In fact, it's a twin privilege.

He says,

"For you have been given not only the privilege of trusting (or believing) in Christ but also the privilege of suffering for him."³

The privilege of suffering?!?

How is this a privilege? Is Paul masochistic? Is he encouraging us to suffer for suffering's sake?

Not hardly.

For him it's a way we can be more like Jesus. And we can be examples and witnesses to the world like Jesus was. Jesus suffered and died for us for many reasons. But one of those reasons was to show us that suffering and death are not the worst things that can possibly happen to us. The things of this world are temporary and ultimately passing away, including death itself. It is heavenly things and heavenly life that are eternal.

Which brings us back to our collect of the day:

"Grant us, Lord, not to be anxious about earthly things, but to love things heavenly; and even now, while we are placed among things that are passing away, to hold fast to those that shall endure."

I said this is a prayer that dates back more than 1,500 years. It was written during a time of great upheaval. It was written in Rome during waves of barbarian invasions. It was a time of death and destruction. It was a time of a total collapse of the political order. And our 5th century Christian ancestors would look at our problems in 2020 and they would tell us that things could be MUCH worse.

And they would tell us to keep our perspective. Partisan politics, pandemic, police shootings, protests... yes, these are serious things. But they are all passing away. Our Christian ancestors would tell us to keep our eyes on the prize, to focus on what is permanent, to focus on the things that shall endure.

It is a privilege to believe in the Good News of Jesus Christ.
It is a privilege to be a citizen of God's eternal kingdom.

We look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come.

³ Philippians 1:29