

Sermon for September 24, 2017
"Dire Straits"

Philippians 1:12-30

The Church today is in dire straits. We have an ancient message that is just not suited to a postmodern, post-Christian world. We are commissioned to proclaim that we all need God. But most believe they are totally self-reliant. They believe that the human animal can do all things. The church is in decline. I am not just talking about the Methodist Church, but the Christian church as a whole. Sure it is growing in the developing countries; places like Asia and Africa and South America. But the trend in North America and Europe is decline; even among the more evangelical churches. Often the Christian perspective is ignored in public discussions. And when the "Christian" perspective is voiced, it is often nothing more than a caricature bereft of the true depth of the Christian faith. It's a two-dimensional oversimplification that instead of creating understanding only fosters prejudice and ignorance. And can you blame people for taking those depictions of the Gospel as adequate explanations? I mean the intricacies and implications of the incarnation and the Trinity can hardly be expressed in a sound bite. And when we do try to apply our theologies, we often fail to acknowledge their depths ourselves. Across the theological spectrum our attempts to express the truth of grace often fall short. Evangelicalism often devolves into a kind of works theology that seems to have forgotten about the Amazing Grace it sings of. Liberal theologies are often so entrenched in a Cartesian mindset that they can't deal adequately with basic Christian beliefs like salvation, the second coming, or even the divinity of Christ. There are those who attempt to make the Christian faith seem more relevant. But often they turn the Gospel into pop psychology or advice on family life. Sure the Gospel applies to those things, but it is more than that too.

On top of all that there are many within the Church who have accepted the world's values. There are some who teach that wealth is the reward God gives us. They say that if you have enough faith you will be financially prosperous. As if there was no greater gift for God's children. There are those on the right and the left that identify political stances as tests of faith. Tell me if you are pro this or anti that and I will tell you if you are a child of God. But the truth of the Gospel cannot be fully expressed in any political platform. Instead of being agents of peace and love in the world, we Christians are often the source of strife and discord. It is one thing to disagree, but we Christians often fail to be civil about our disagreements.

We fight amongst ourselves for almost every reason, some good, some maybe not so good. It seems as if the very foundation of the Church will crumble. The Church is in dire straits! What are we to do?

Meanwhile back in the first century, the brothers and sisters in Philippi are wringing their hands. They say, "What are we to do? Have you heard what has happened? They have arrested Paul the great Apostle! We need him to help us to spread the Gospel. Proclaiming Christ crucified is foolishness to the Greeks and a stumbling block to Jews. He was the only one who could reason with them the way he reasoned with us. How can we go on without Paul to help us? Without Paul no one will listen to us and hear the Gospel."

"What makes matters worse is that some people are taking advantage of Paul's imprisonment. They are saying that Paul was wrong to begin with. They say that God wouldn't let a good man be thrown in jail. So they say he must be wrong. They are teaching that the Greek men need to be circumcised to be followers of Christ. There are also others teaching that there is a secret knowledge that will bring salvation. They say that the Gospel Paul preaches is incomplete. And that people must join them and learn the whole truth."

"All this bickering amongst us may cause us to be rent asunder. We are a small Church and the powers that oppose us are so great. We could be squashed. Then where would the Gospel be?"

As Paul sat in jail back in Rome, he heard of the Philippians' distress, so he wrote them a letter to ease their minds. He said, "I know that you are worried about how I am doing in Prison. But I want you to know, sisters and brothers, that what has happened to me has served to advance the Gospel. While here I have had opportunity to tell the guards about Christ, and people have heard that a Roman citizen was willing to go to jail for worshiping Jesus and so they want to hear about Jesus. The local Church here has been strengthened by my witness in their midst just as you were when I first came to Philippi."

“I have also heard about those detractors. They are proclaiming Christ out of envy and rivalry, for no good reason, no matter what, at least the truth of Christ is proclaimed; and in that I rejoice.

“I am not sure if I will die or be acquitted, but I know that either way it will be for Christ. I know that you need me so I am sure that I will be delivered in the flesh and be by to see you so that you may glorify God.”

I am sure that the Philippians were glad to hear that word. After all how could they go on without Paul? They needed his guidance to be able to proclaim the Gospel. He seemed to be the only one who could quell their doubts in the face of fantastic odds. Paul was their only hope.

But you know what? Chances are Paul never did get back to Philippi. If Paul was writing from Rome, as many believe, he was martyred before he ever returned to Philippi. And even if he was writing from somewhere else, chances are he wasn't around for long. Paul the great Apostle died.

But you know what? The Gospel advanced! After Paul died the Church went on. The church faced persecution and many faithful souls were martyred, but the gospel continued to advance. After a while in the 11th century the Christian church split. The eastern part, run from Constantinople, said “We are the Orthodox Church.” The western part, run from Rome, said “We are the Catholic Church.” But despite this division in the ranks the Gospel advanced. Year piled on year and century after century and Martin Luther defied the church authority and said “Here I stand I can do no other.” And the church said “Good, you can stand outside.” As a result the eastern half of the church was divided again into the Protestant and the Catholic churches. Yet the Gospel advanced. Then a group of reformers got too radical for Luther. Some said only adults could be baptized and others that God predestined all things. Because of that people even killed one another over their theological differences. But the Gospel advanced. Wesley laid hands on Coke, but who laid hands on him? Yet the Gospel advanced. King said, “I have a dream!” and since they couldn't kill the dream, they killed the dreamer, and the Gospel advanced.

And the Gospel will continue to advance! The United Methodist Church can decline into oblivion, and the Gospel will advance. The Southern Baptist Convention can splinter into a thousand pieces, and the Gospel will advance. The Anglican Communion can be rent asunder over issues of gender and sexuality, and the Gospel will advance. The Roman Catholic Church can continue to crumble on its right and left edges, and the Gospel will advance. The world can continue to marginalize the church and regard its teachings and inconsequential, and the Gospel will advance.

The Gospel will advance until the end of time when Christ comes again and makes a new heaven and a new earth. The Gospel will advance because the Gospel is bigger than our earthly institutions and leaders. The Gospel is bigger than Paul, and Luther, and Wesley. The Gospel is bigger than the Roman Catholic Church, or the Southern Baptist Convention or the United Methodist Church. The Gospel is even bigger than Aldersgate United Methodist Church!

Paul wrote; “with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me to live is Christ, to die is gain.” There is an assumption at work in that statement. It is that there is a power greater than us in charge of advancing the Gospel. God is in charge. The Gospel will advance, because God Almighty wishes that it advance.

But, sisters and brothers, this is not a call to complacency. Paul's words to the Philippians ring down to us through the centuries. He writes; “²⁷Meanwhile, live in such a way that you are a credit to the Message of Christ. Let nothing in your conduct hang on whether I come or not. Your conduct must be the same whether I show up to see things for myself or hear of it from a distance. Stand united, singular in vision, contending for people's trust in the Message, the good news, ²⁸not flinching or dodging in the slightest before the opposition. Your courage and unity will show them what they're up against: defeat for them, victory for you - and both because of God. ²⁹There's far more to this life than trusting in Christ. There's also suffering for him. And the suffering is as much a gift as the trusting. ³⁰You're involved in the same kind of struggle you saw me go through, on which you are now getting an updated report in this letter.”(The Message)

The church may be in dire straits, but the Gospel is in the hands of God. So instead of fretting about our circumstances, let us work together for the Glory of God. Let's follow the advice Paul gave the Philippians. Let's band together and focus on the good news of new life in Jesus Christ. The whole time let us remember that we are participating in the same effort as Paul and Luther and Wesley. T.S. Eliot said, “The True Church can never fail. For it is based upon a rock.” (*The Hippopotamus*). Remember that the gospel will advance, because God Almighty wills that it advance.