



The Trinity Pulpit



A Life Worth Living Philippians 3:17—4:1

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Christian calendar very closely, I missed out on learning about Lent and the rich Christian theology it represents. It wasn't until I came to Trinity that I was first exposed to Advent and Lent and the true meaning behind each season.

The number 40 that we find in Lent has great significance in the Christian tradition. In the Old Testament, the Israelites wandered for 40 years in the desert before being allowed to enter into the Promised Land. In the New Testament, Jesus spent 40 days in the desert fasting while preparing for his public ministry. The 40 days of Lent is a time for all Christians to use for self-examination while preparing for the death and resurrection of Christ. Christians are to evaluate their lives through prayer, meditation and self-denial. Lent has been traditionally a time to give up something in self-denial and to give charity to the poor as a blessing to others while following in the footsteps of Jesus.

Like many good Baptists, I am often motivated by guilt. I am often reminded of the sacrifice of Christ, especially during the Lenten season. In my finite mind, I rationalize that I should do all that I do because of what Christ did for me on the cross. It has always served as a source of motivation. If Jesus could die on the cross for my sins than I can or I should...you fill in the blank. I don't believe that I am alone in this way of rationalization.

Over time, I have come to learn that we were created for more than serving our God and Savior out of guilt. Though guilt can be a great motivator at times, it seems to wear off over time. I am more motivated now than ever before since I have come to realize that God invites all of us to participate in God's mission of restoring the world unto Himself. We play the role of being agents of restoration through obedience to Christ's Great Command and

Great Commission. We are active parts of God's grand plan of one day restoring all of creation back to its original design. Did you get that? We are co-laborers with our Almighty God! That is a life worth living!

One of the areas God has been working with me in becoming a better agent of restoration is learning to live in poverty. Yes, you heard that correctly. I didn't make a mistake and I truly believe we all need to learn to live in poverty, no matter our socio-economic level. Henri Nouwen, a renowned theologian, defines poverty as "the readiness to live a life in which you have nothing to lose so that you can always begin afresh."¹ Nouwen believed that living in this type of poverty makes us vulnerable but it also frees us to see the world through a different set of lens. I agree with Nouwen that if we can live free from the oppressive weight of materialism, we would have an entirely different view of not only money and material things but also life in general.

By no means do I stand before you to say that I have managed to live with this definition of poverty in my own life. I will admit that I am as materialistic or even more so than the next person. This is an area of my life that God is dealing with me on a personal level. I am struggling to gain a greater understanding of Nouwen's definition of poverty and strive to take a step closer to the ideal each day.

This is the exact place where we find Paul in our text today. Earlier in chapter 3, Paul declares that he has not achieved perfection. Paul declares himself rubbish compared to the greatness of Christ. Paul desired to not be righteous in his actions but only obtain righteousness through Christ. Paul knew that he had not achieved perfection but

was willing to hold on to the things for which Christ had taken hold of him. Paul makes it clear that it isn't about where in the faith journey you are or what you have done in the past. The faith journey is about pressing forward from whatever point God has taken hold of us individually and not giving up. We are to simply live up to what we have already attained in that journey.

Let me illustrate it in this way: When you come to a saving relationship with Jesus, you begin our faith journey. You grow in your faith from point A to point B. Christ desires for us to live up to the level we have obtained in our faith journey. However, when you reach point B, Paul says we are to press forward and strive to reach point C. When we reach point C, Christ desires for us to live up to that point in our faith. This process continues until we come face-to-face with Christ in heaven.

In today's text, Paul challenges the Christians in Philippi to follow his example, not because he has already obtained perfection, but because he was willing to be a positive example for others. Paul then instructs the listeners to turn away from worldly ways and turn toward the Kingdom of God where our citizenship lies. Finally, Paul tells his followers to stand firm against the opposition for everything is under God's control. Just as it was for the church in Philippi, by doing all of these mentioned we will live sacrificial lives, the only way of life worth living.

Paul lived a life worthy of living and worthy of following. Early in his life, Saul was the chief Pharisee, leading the charge against Christianity. He found ways to persecute the Christians, taking their possessions and ultimately their lives. Then God showed up in Saul's life. While on the road to Damascus, Saul was blinded by a light and God spoke to him in an audible voice. God simply asked why Saul was persecuting God's people, bringing spiritual light into the life of Saul. Saul then became Paul and was as passionate about sharing Christ with Jews and Gentiles as he was persecuting the Jews previously. Paul suffered shipwrecks, beatings, and imprisonments for preaching Christ but nothing deterred him from serving God. Paul's zeal and effectiveness was surpassed by none, other than Christ. Paul was a godly example of sacrificial living.

Throughout history, there have been many others who have sacrificed everything to live as

Christ taught us to live. Mother Teresa, born in Albania but had a heart for the people of India, founded Missionaries of Charity and served the poor of Calcutta for 45 years. Mother Teresa cared for the poor, the lepers and the lowest caste of India. Her goal was to be the presence of Christ in the most difficult of times, not working to prevent people from dying but rather helping them to maintain their dignity in their last days of suffering. Throughout her 45 years, thousands in Calcutta received her love and compassion but millions around the world have been inspired and challenged to follow the example of this godly woman.

Deeply rooted in our Baptist heritage, Lottie Moon lived a life worth living. After being called into the ministry as an 18 year old woman, she first landed in North China to teach at a girls' school with her sister at the age of 33. While spending her first 12 years teaching at the girl's school, she realized her passion was in the area of personal evangelism. She then left the school, went into the countryside, preaching the Good News to all who would listen. She also had a powerful ministry of writing. She often wrote back to the Foreign Mission Board of Southern Baptists, describing the great need in China and asking for more missionaries to come to the mission field. In one of the letters, she boldly asked the Foreign Mission Board to declare the week before Christmas as "foreign mission week." The WMU picked up on her request and brought it to fruition, collecting a little over \$3,000 for foreign missions in 1888. Now millions of dollars are collected annually during the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering through the International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention.

In the latter part of her ministry, Lottie Moon was struck by the pain and suffering of the people who were literally starving to death. She spent the rest of her life using her own food and money to feed the hungry around her at the neglect of her own health. She died at the age of 74 due to starvation, weighing only 50 lbs. at the time of her death. Lottie Moon lived an exemplary life worth living.

There are many others who have made an impact all over the world that we do not have time to mention this morning. However, we don't have to look very far to see examples of people who are godly examples. Look around you. There are many

here in our congregation who inspire people to follow Christ. Who have you been influenced by? Another question we need to ask ourselves this morning is who are we inspiring by being godly examples? Do our children see us as examples worthy of following? Do our students see Jesus in our lives? Does your neighbor quietly notice your compassion and concern for others? I implore you this morning to live lives worthy of others to follow. Live sacrificially and learn to live in poverty as Henri Nouwen defined, ready to lose everything because we ultimately have nothing to lose in Christ.

As we work to live exemplary lives, we must turn away from the ways of the world. Paul passionately pleaded with the Christians in Philippi to turn from the wicked ways of the culture around him. Scholars note that this was the only recorded time that Paul was brought to tears as compassion overwhelmed him. Not only did many not follow the ways of Christ but they went out of their way to attack Christianity as their enemies. The culture at that time was more concerned about gratifying their physical wants and needs, opting for the instant gratification. Sound familiar?

If Paul was standing here today, I believe that he would weep at what he would see in our culture. He would be overwhelmed at our culture's selfishness, instant self-gratification and the overwhelming sense of materialism. Verse 19 would not only apply to today's culture but define it for a large majority. Our culture has bought into the idea of "what is mine is mine and what is yours is mine." It pushes all of us to hoard things for ourselves in the disguise of "saving for the future." We buy, collect and store up treasures in our barns in hopes that one day we may live in comfort and ease. Do we ever get to a point when enough is enough?

Just a week ago, media all over the world converged on Ponte Vedra Beach, Florida to hear a 12 minute statement from the top ranked golfer in the world. Tiger Woods, the first billion dollar athlete, stood in front of the world to apologize for his indiscretions in his personal life. He used the words "selfish," "foolish," and "entitled" to describe his actions. The richest, and probably the most powerful athlete, has been decimated from chasing after the worldly things. An athlete who is known for his mental toughness and guarded life-

style fell into the temptations of money, power and greed. Enough was never enough. It ended in destruction. It always does. But this can happen to any one of us.

Most of us struggle with the art of being content. In Philippians 4:12, Paul says, "I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want." Have you learned the secret of being content? For most in our culture, more is better. A bigger house, a nicer car and more toys than we have time to enjoy are held in high regard in our culture. Me, me, me. Mine, mine, mine. Things, things, things. This is the culture we live in. We must learn the secret of being content and turn from the ways of the world and turn toward the teachings of Jesus.

The only way to learn the secret of being content is to take the focus off of ourselves and place it on others around us. A word that gets thrown around a lot in the theological world these days is "missional." Most are still trying to wrap their minds around what it means to be missional, but a simple definition could be to love more profoundly and more deeply. It is the essence of being an agent of restoration, exemplifying Christ in all that we do and in all that we say. It is displaying compassion at all times with everyone we meet. Compassion is found in relationships. It is while we are in relationship that compassion will help us to be more missional, giving of ourselves in everyday life while being content with who we are in Christ.

Nouwen says this about compassion:

"Compassion is daring to acknowledge our mutual destiny so that we might move forward, all together, into the land which God is showing us. Compassion also means sharing in joy, which can be just as important as sharing in pain. To give others the chance to be completely happy, to let their joy blossom to the full. We offer real comfort and support when we can say from our hearts: "That's really good for you," or "I'm glad to see you made it."²

With compassion, we love more profoundly and love more deeply.

Finally, Paul told the Philippians to stand firm against the opposition for God is bringing about transformation. Paul understood what it meant to be transformed. He experienced a great transformation on the road to Damascus. Due to that transformation, his life was turned upside down and his reason for living changed.

This same type of transformation can happen to each of us. God is transforming our lowly bodies into heavenly bodies through the process of discipleship. Yes, our earthly bodies will break down and fail us at the end before we receive a heavenly body for the rest of eternity. However, I also believe transformation of our lowly bodies into heavenly bodies is happening to us right now through the process of discipleship and sanctification. As we learn more about what it means to live in poverty and to live more content, we are being transformed by the renewing of our minds. (Romans 12:2) We are no longer becoming like the world but rather molding ourselves to the mind of Christ.

In this transformation process, there is no doubt that we will face opposition. We are going against the current of society and that always brings ridicule and persecution. Culture will not

understand God's economy of enough and contentment. Culture will not support the spirit of giving in ordinary times. It will not understand when the Church stands up to live in poverty, willing to give it all up for the sake of Christ. It will try to project shame to those that will not buy into the ambition of "more is always better." This transformation will not go unnoticed.

So we are to stand firm. As the body of Christ, we are not seeking the world's approval but the approval of our Lord and Savior. We do not seek love from our culture; rather we find it in Christ and we learn to abide in it. In the end, it comes down to obedience. Are we willing to follow the teachings of Christ or will we seek the approval of our society by blending in with culture?

Are you living a life worth living? May God use this Lenten season to examine our hearts, encouraging us to strive forward toward the greatness of Christ, living with contentment, with an attitude of poverty, and boldness to swim against the current of our culture. ❖

¹Henri Nouwen, *With Open Hands* (1972; repr.,

Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2005), 117.

²Ibid., 97.

