

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
 September 21, 2008  
 09.21 Means of Grace—Generous Living

Philippians 1:21-30

On Wednesday morning, September 17, 2008, a car bomb exploded outside of the U. S. embassy in Yemen. By the end of the attack sixteen were dead, including six terrorists, six Yemeni soldiers & one American woman.

We've become accustomed to them, haven't we, these suicide bombers? They've become a part of the air we breathe, the background noise to our everyday lives. We know about the financial rewards offered to their families. We know about the theology that proclaims them heroes among those in heaven & promises an eternal romp with seventy-two virgins who are "beautiful like rubies, with complexions like diamonds & pearls." (Koran, [www.apologeticsindex.org/s37.html](http://www.apologeticsindex.org/s37.html)) We even know many of the reasons for their anger & their thirst for revenge: homes confiscated, bulldozed & resettled; barred from work; family members killed.

Ultimately, however, according to terrorism expert Roni Shaked <sup>(Ibid., USA Today, 6/26/01)</sup> suicide bombers are not moved by financial rewards, honor, glory or sex. They are motivated by an absolute devotion to God. "It's not a heroic thing, it is a holy thing."

And Paul writes, "...to die is gain." Dying for a holy cause—it's not strictly a radical Muslim thing. It moves us as well.

But is that the point that Paul is trying to make? What he writes is, "To live is Christ, to die is gain." He's not advocating a martyr's death. He's advocating a Christian life. In living it, he reminds us that we need not fear what this world might do to us because we know that Christ has defeated death & therefore "...to die is gain." But his point is how we live.

So, "To live is Christ..." but what does that mean?

"To live is Christ..." The Christ is Immanuel, "God with us." "To live is Christ..." means that God's presence, grace, love, forgiveness, hope & faith are here with us in the midst of this life. But Christ also means "anointed." "To live is Christ..." means to be anointed, chosen, trusted & beloved of God. It is to know & experience the gospel personally, to be created just enough "lower than the angels" <sup>(Psalm 8:5a)</sup> to know what they do not, i.e. the depths of God's passion, power & love for we who have fallen. "To live is Christ..." is to have the power, authority, calling & grace to live accordingly, "...in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ... standing firm in *one* spirit, striving *side by side* with *one* mind for the faith of the gospel..."

The point is not to die for Christ. The point is to live Christ, to live graciously & generously the love of Christ in this world. Paul knows well what that means for he has tasted it. He writes to the church at Philippi from a prison cell. Prisons back then were not run like prisons in our country today. They did not provide you with clothing or bedding or food or medical care. Whatever you needed to survive came from others outside. The Philippians have been helping Paul through this time. They've sent money. They've sent supplies. They've sent one of their own, Epaphroditus, to be present with him, to provide a connection with his friends & church family, to sustain him in his faith & whatever needs he might have. They live Christ for him, just as he has pledged himself for them.

Paul's situation is one of facing hardship, not seeking martyrdom, & so has a very different word to speak to us than those of a suicide bomber. As we face the hardships of

financial collapse in our markets today, as we worry about the economy, about our jobs, bank accounts, retirement funds & 401Ks, as we stress over inflation, recession, etc., what might Paul say to us? What does it mean for us to live Christ for one another? What does it mean to face the future together without fear but with love instead?

“Living Christ” is what John & Charles Wesley intend when they talk about “generous living” as a means of grace. It’s about sharing with others the gifts by which God has gifted us, including but not limited to our money, time, friendship & support. It’s not about finding something worth dying for. It’s about finding something (or someone) worth living for.

One more thing, when we practice generous living, it’s not just we who grow in God’s grace. The church grows, too. Joan Chittister tells a story that is illustrative:

“There was a Benedictine community to whom nobody came. As the monks grew old, they became more and more disheartened because they couldn’t understand why their community was not attractive to other people. Now in the woods outside the monastery there lived an old rabbi. People came from all over to talk to him about the presence of Yahweh in creation. Years went by and finally the abbot himself went into the woods, leaving word with his monks, I have gone out to speak to the rabbi. (It was of course considered humiliating that a Christian community had to go back to the synagogue to find out what was wrong with them.)

“When the abbot finally found the rabbi’s hut in the woods, the rabbi welcomed him with open arms as if he had known that he was coming. They put their arms around each other and had a good cry. The abbot told the rabbi that his monks were good men but they spread not fire, and the community was dying. He asked the rabbi if he had any insight into the work of Yahweh in their lives. The rabbi replied, I have the secret and I will tell you once. You may tell the monks and then none of you is ever to repeat it to one another. The abbot declared that if they could have the secret, he was sure his monks would grow.

“So the rabbi looked at him long and hard and said, The secret is that among you, in one of you is the Messiah! The abbot went back to this community and told his monks the secret. And lo! as they began to search for the Messiah in one another they grew, they loved, they became very strong, very prophetic. And the old conference ends: From that day on, the community saw Him in one another and flourished!” (*—Homiletics*; story told by Joan D. Chittister, OSB, *Living the Rule Today: A Series of Conferences on the Rule of Benedict* (Erie, Pa.: Benet Press, 1982), 98-99, as quoted on pp. 82-83 of Wolff-Walini.)

What would I have us do this week? (question asked of Bishop Blake by a Texas 6-year-old) We’ve already talked about (& hopefully practiced) the one condition, three General Rules, & the ordinances & means of grace of communion, fasting & simplicity. (*To review:*

- One Condition: “a desire to flee from the wrath to come, & to be saved from [our] sins.”
- Rule #1: “By doing no harm, by avoiding evil of every kind.”
- Rule #2: “By... doing good of every possible sort, & as far as possible, to all.”
- Rule #3: “By attending upon all the ordinances of God.” (*The Book of Discipline of TUMC, 2004, pg. 48*)

This week, know that one of us is the Christ. Let us go forth to practice the art of generous living, looking for the Christ among us that the grace of God might grow.