

# *LESSONS IN LIVING*

## *Transitions*

A St. Andrew's Sermon

Delivered by Rev. Nan Jenkins

July 24, 2011

Scripture Reading: Philippians 1:12-2:2 (The Inclusive Bible)

Grace and peace be yours from our God.

Thus began Paul's greeting to the church in Philippi, his last letter to the believers who had stood by his side from the time he arrived in their community. Paul had a special place in his heart for these believers. Many others had fallen by the wayside through the trials of life, but these particular Christians continued to stand with him, send him things that he needed, and provide someone to help him during his imprisonment.

Perhaps that was because they understood better than most what he was going through. Over and over again he indicates that they were enduring much of the same things he was enduring. They too were under Roman control. They too were ridiculed and spat upon and imprisoned. It gave them a connection that would never be broken.

Because of the closeness of their relationship, Paul continued to try to help them understand the faith of those who called themselves Christians. He tried to help them make good decisions about their lives in community. In this letter he addresses several concerns that he has been told about.

He also addresses their concerns about him, and that piece was the thing that hooked me in this letter. Let me give you a little history about Paul's letters and me.

When I was in seminary, I thought that I'd never preach from any of Paul's work. After all, he was the one who told women to be quiet in church, to cover their heads, not take leadership roles, etc. Not someone I was interested in studying or quoting. Later in my career, we were asked by the national church to do a study on I Corinthians as a hope that we might get everyone on the same page regarding Biblical interpretation, especially regarding ordination. So, I decided I'd do it, and I was caught up in the words and wisdom and connection I felt with this man from so long ago. He and the faith communities he ministered with were so much like the ones today. Many issues are almost the same. The instructions he gave were still right on target. His understanding of God was beyond what most of us know and understand. I found myself in tears as I came to the end of it, not wanting to say goodbye to these new friends, just as I would any good book.

When I decided that I'd use Philippians as my final goodbye scriptures in Elgin, I found again that Paul's words and wisdom fit our situation there beautifully. I was hooked in this very first

chapter when I came to verse 20, for it seemed to me that Paul was saying/ praying that he would be able to stand the test of faith and not be ashamed of his words or actions, that he would be seen as one who was able to witness to the end of his life. The New Revised Version of the Bible says it this way, “It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be put to shame in any way, but that by my speaking with all boldness, Christ will be exalted now as always in by body, whether by life or by death.”

I had this vision of Paul sitting in the prison cell, darkness and fear and sadness filling the room where he and others were held. He was facing probable death—by the lions, the pyre, the cross, or who knows what other kind of torture the Romans might create for one who refused to worship Caesar Augustus. Paul obviously did not know, and didn’t even know for sure that he would die. He might spend the rest of his life in prison instead. That would not necessarily be easier, for it wasn’t like prisons today, and even that would not be easy.

So he prayed and hoped that he would be able to continue to witness to his faith in God, that in his death, his faith would be as present and obvious as in his life. He was facing the final transition in life, and he wanted it to be worthwhile.

I suppose that one could say that transitions are synonymous with life, for without them, we would continue to be babies, still drinking milk, still requiring diapers. Some transitions are outward and obvious, like going to school, graduating from high school, then college, getting married or not, having children or not, going to work, etc, etc. You know the list. You know your important transitions.

Then there are the transitions that are inward and not so readily obvious. They would be those moments, those “Ah ha” moments when the light turns on, and we “get it.” Those kind take all sorts of directions. We may begin doing something or stop doing something. It might be like the alcoholics who suddenly are ready to stop drinking and are willing to do whatever is necessary to accomplish that. Or it may be something like the time when I figuratively threw my mother’s voice into the fire, and began using my own voice. Didn’t seem much different to most folks, I’m sure, but I quit having laryngitis before every sermon I preached.

Many years ago, during the height of the self-help, self-development stage in this country, I gave a lecture on transitions. I was in the midst of several of them, having just divorced, started working full time, gone back to school to train to be a chaplain, and so forth. My stress scale test came in 650 points on a scale where over 100 was supposed to put you in the hospital! I talked about how we outgrow where we are, and have to break out of the box and move into a new environment. It is a scary move because when we break free from the confines of the box, it seems like we are thrown into outer space where there are no boundaries, no limits, no rules for guidance. Just free floating with no anchors. That’s scary. Remember??

Then, we discover that we aren’t in outer space. We are just in a larger box and it only seems like there are no boundaries because we haven’t found them yet, we haven’t grown into them yet.

That process happens over and over again, I’m guessing until our end of days, for life just keeps on changing. Thank goodness the process slows down some! We have a little more time to grow accustomed to present circumstances before we have to break out into a new world. But I find that I continue to experience transitions in life, and these days I hope that I never stop having

these experiences because I now can see how they keep me vital and growing and keeping up, at least to some extent, in our fast-changing world. I just wish they'd keep the television remote control the same for a few more years!

As a chaplain I work with people who are thrust into major life transitions, sometimes with no warning ahead of time. A son dies because he didn't put on a helmet, a wife has a heart attack, a child drowns in the back yard pool, or a baby dies in the womb. The people who loved them are suddenly into grief and sorrow that was unimaginable a few days prior. They will have decisions to make in the coming year that will determine how they deal with the grief and pain and loss. None of us knows how we might respond to such a situation. We don't even know what our decisions might be regarding things like chemo for cancer until we are faced with the reality of it. The way we handle such transitions depends largely on our view of life, on our faith, on our experience with other transitions earlier in life.

In his letter to the Philippians Paul shows great courage in the face of horrible possibilities. He can only do that because he has faced other challenges in his life, and because he has had experiences that reinforce his faith in God. He knows that God will stand with him because he has experienced God's presence before when he was in prison or facing threats from the mobs.

His debate with himself over whether he hopes to live or hopes to die is interesting because he can't come to a decision—not that he has much to say in the matter. He finds positives in each outcome. He simply hopes that he is able to continue to witness to the love of God and to help those he has had a hand in converting to the faith. He is putting the best face on a horrible situation. He can only do that because he believes that his life and his death is not really in the hands of Caesar and his minions, but rather, it is in the hand of God.

Through the years in my ministry, I have seen many people face hard times, major transitions, difficult decisions. When I have been called on to help folks who haven't thought about the meaning of life or found a faith model that is meaningful for them, I find that they don't have a foundation that allows them to make a transition gracefully. They tend to panic and be very fearful of the future and what it holds. And I have a hard time knowing what to say to them because we have no common language with which to communicate.

One of my patients who taught me the most was a woman who was one of the few true atheists I've ever met. She knew more about all religions than I did. She had spent years reading and thinking and coming to conclusions that led to her belief that there is no god of any kind, that when we die, we return to the earth and that is all there is. She was totally content with that belief, and throughout her illness, cancer, she never veered from that. I had complete respect for her and had no trouble supporting her during her illness. Her "faith" served her well because she believed deeply what would happen to her at the end. I have more trouble with those who are outwardly religious but have never really thought about what they believe, so don't have any depth to depend upon when life throws them fireballs instead of candy.

Those transitions are ones that we will all face eventually. I think the harder ones may be the ones that come earlier in life when we don't have the depth of experience that tells us it is ok to be in that zone where we can't find the boundaries. This time of year, there a lots of high school graduates gathering all their "stuff" to go to college. It is an exciting time, but also scary, to leave home for the first time, live with a stranger, move into that next level of education that you know

is going to be harder and more of a challenge. And their parents are faced with letting go on a new level. It is good to get the room in house back, not to have that ravenous eater around all the time! But the transition is hard, especially when it leaves the parents with the infamous empty nest.

Hopefully, Paul can give us some pointers on how to deal with such situations. His confidence is always the shining example to me. It stands out, especially in this situation where he is facing such a horrible death or life. For him, he doesn't focus on the horrible, but on the positives. He sees what good can come of either outcome. Living lets him continue to witness to the love of God. Dying gets him to his reward on the other side. Either is so compelling to him that he doesn't know which one to pray for.

And he is thankful for the opportunity this gives him to witness to his faith. Perhaps that is the real key. He not only sees the positives in the situation but he is grateful for whatever opportunities may come his way because of it.

If Paul can have that kind of confidence in his beliefs, so can we. If he can stake his reputation on his conduct at the end, then we too can show our faith, our confidence, in how we conduct ourselves, not only in that final transition, but in the ones between now and then.

That is the value of faith. It isn't about what happens after we die. It is about how we live our lives before we die. It is about how we care for others, how we show our love for others, how we conduct ourselves in the face of whatever happens in our lives in all those transition times.

I was quite taken last week with the man who tried his best to save the life of the guy who shot him in a robbery and was sentenced to death. No one seemed to care that the survivor didn't want that kind of retribution, but his witness was powerful and I'm so glad it became known, since it may help someone else heal from some kind of assault.

At the urging of David Brooks, NY Times op-ed columnist, I looked up Dudley Clendinen's column in the Times about having Lou Gehrig's disease and dealing with his coming death. A couple of paragraphs in there are really good examples of what I've been trying to say about living.

"We obsess in this country about how to eat and dress and drink, about finding a job and a mate. About having sex and children. About how to live. But we don't talk about how to die. We act as if facing death weren't one of life's greatest, most absorbing thrills and challenges. Believe me, it is. This is not dull. But we have to be able to see doctors and machines, medical and insurance systems, family and friends and religions as informative—not governing—in order to be free.

And that's the point. This is not about one particular disease or even about Death. It's about Life, when you know there's not much left. That is the weird blessing of Lou [Gehrig's]. There is no escape, and nothing much to do. It's liberating....

I'm having a wonderful time.... I spend a lot of time writing letters and notes, and taping conversations about this time, which I think of as the Good Short Life (and Loving Exit)...."(Dudley Clendinen. The Good Short Life, NY Times, July 9, 2011)

Clendinen had learned what Paul knew. I suppose in self-help speak one could call it “living in the moment.” But it really is having a depth of knowledge about yourself, your faith (however that is defined and believed), being confident that life is good, the afterlife is just fine (whatever it turns out), and every one of us is safe. I believe that is in the arms of God. I believe there is an afterlife, but you know, if it turns out that isn’t true, then so be it. As one of my favorite people likes to say, “It is what it is. It’ll be what it’ll be.”

Paul’s admonition to the Philippian believers was this: “Conduct yourselves, then, in a way worthy of the Gospel of Christ. If you do, whether I come and see you myself or hear about your behavior from a distance, it will be clear that you’re standing firm in unity of spirit, and exerting yourselves with one accord for the faith of the Gospel without being intimidated by your enemies.”

That foundation and confidence in it will take us far in all the transitions in life, including those in the Presbyterian Church. May God give us the courage and strength to stand by our faith, so that we too may not be ashamed of our faith and our hope in Christ.

Amen.

*Transcribed and edited by a member of the St. Andrew’s Sermon Transcription Project.*