

## 25<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

**Exodus 16:2-15; Psalm 105:1-6, 37-45; Matthew 20:1-16; Philippians 1:21-30.**

**Exodus 16:2-15** begins the story of Israel's 40 year tenure in the wilderness. Moses had told the Pharaoh why the Israelites were to be freed as a nation. "Let my people go that they may worship me in the wilderness" (5:1). Now, freed of Egyptian tyranny, the Israelites broke camp and followed Moses out into the desert, as he led them toward Mount Sinai. There, on the mountain where God had first revealed himself to Moses as Yahweh, all of Israel was to meet with God, worship God and learn what they were now called by God to be and do. So now they were on their way to Mount Sinai.

The journey to Mount Sinai would take three months. But during those three months, Israel would have several experiences that would be a foreshadowing of the struggles they were facing that would eventually decree that they had to remain in the wilderness for 40 years so that the entire generation of former slaves could die and be replaced with a new generation hardened in the desert!

As the people trekked through the wilderness, the inevitable happened! They ran out of food! What would they do?

What the people chose to do was to grumble. "The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness" (16:2), the author of the book of Exodus tells us. He even records their complaint. "If only we had died by the hand of Yahweh in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger" (16:3).

"Life was good in Egypt", they kept complaining. "We may have been slaves there – but we also had lots of meat ('fleshpots') and bread to eat, and we were never hungry". How quickly they were forgetting what slavery was like.

The grumbling of the people about not having enough food was one more indication of a disturbing trend among them. Consider similar references in earlier parts of the story about Israel's liberation.

At the Reed Sea: "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness (that is, "Aren't there enough tombs in Egypt to accommodate us that you had to take the Israelites out into the desert to die")? What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt? Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, 'Let us alone and let us serve the Egyptians'? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness" (14:11-12).

In response to Pharaoh's order to increase production in the light of Moses' demand for Israelite freedom: "Yahweh look upon you and judge! You have brought us into bad odor with Pharaoh and his officials, and have put a sword in their hand to kill us" (5:21).

The Israelites seemed accomplished in complaining. They complained during the actions Moses and Aaron led to gain their release from Pharaoh. They complained at the Reed Sea. And now they complained in the wilderness. In fact, God's initial response to the Israelites' plight came as a result of their vocal complaining, for the text states, "The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God. God heard their groaning, and God took notice of them" (2:23-25). Truly the squeaking wheel gets the grease!

Now the Israelites were at it again. And God continued to respond to their complaint.

"Then Yahweh said to Moses, 'I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather on other days.' So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, 'In the evening you shall know that it was Yahweh who brought you out of the land of Egypt, and in the morning you shall see the glory of the Lord. When Yahweh gives you meat to eat in the evening and your fill of bread in the morning, because Yahweh has heard the complaining that you utter against him – what are we? Your complaining is not against us but against Yahweh'" (16:4-5, 8).

God is true to God's word. Each evening, a flock of quail would fly through the camp and would light on the ground to rest. There, the Israelites were able to catch them and thus have fresh meat to eat in the evening. Again, in the morning, when the Israelites arose, they found the ground covered with a strange bread-like substance. They would gather and eat it, and between the quail and this "manna", the Israelites were more than adequately fed. And their complaining (at least about their food) now ended.

A word needs to be said about the "manna". "Manna" was the name given by the Israelites to this strange substance they would find outside their camp every morning (except the Sabbath day; instead, in order to keep the Sabbath and do no work, the Israelites were instructed to gather the day before two days' supply of manna). We have no idea what this "manna" was. It was described by the writer of Exodus as "a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground" (vs. 14) or "a fine, flake-like thing" (ESV translation of vs. 14). We know that it was obviously highly-nutritious (the Israelites continued to live on it for their 40 year sojourn in the wilderness - vs. 35), and that it was described as "like coriander seed, white, and the taste of it was like wafers made with honey" (vs. 31). Most scholars think that it was a honey-like secretion of insects that infest the tamarisk plant throughout that wilderness (incidentally, the Arabs still call that secretion "manna" even to this day) that solidifies into wafers in the cold desert night but must be gathered early in the morning and eaten, or it will turn rancid.

What is particularly intriguing is the name that the Israelites gave this substance – "manna". When the Israelites first saw it upon arising one morning, they asked each other "What is it" (vs. 15)? In Hebrew, the question "What is it" is pronounced *man hu*. Said often, these words would quickly turn into "manna". Thus, the name was captured in the question. When the Israelites pointed to it on the ground and asked, "What is it" (*man hu*), they were saying "Manna"!

The point of this story, however, is that God provides sufficiency (not abundance, but sufficiency) for God's own. God responds to the people's complaint and feeds them with

mystery food – both manna and quail. Thus, God has provided for their daily sustenance even in the midst of their grumbling and complaining. But we will see that the complaining continues to go on, and in fact, grows in intensity so that it becomes obvious to Yahweh and Moses alike that these people have been so deprived of their capacity to take charge of their own situation that they have become almost totally dependent both upon outside decision-making and outside intervention to solve their problems. And that reality has grave consequences for both the forming of a nation in the wilderness and that nation taking back the Promised Land once given to them by Yahweh.

**Psalm 105:1-6, 37-45** is the first of two psalms (Psalms 105 and 106) that celebrate and rehearse the sacred history of Israel. So rather than concentrate on God as creator, it is building the argument of trust in God on his trustworthy nature, as proven through the history of Israel. It begins,

“O give thanks to the Lord, call on his name; make known his deeds among the peoples. Sing to him; sing praises to him; tell of all his wonderful works. Glory in his holy name; let the hearts of those who seek the Lord rejoice. Seek the Lord and his strength; seek his presence continually. Remember the wonderful works he has done, his miracles, and the judgments he uttered” (105:1-5).

Thus begins a recital of the mighty acts of God as such acts both impact Israel and bring about its salvation. The psalmist begins with God’s choice of Abraham and the covenant made with Abraham which God carried out through the patriarch’s descendants in Canaan (vss. 5-15), Joseph and his rescue of both Egypt and Israel from certain starvation (vss. 16-25), Moses and Aaron and their confrontation with Pharaoh (vss. 26-36), the wilderness wanderings and God’s protection of them in such harsh conditions (vss. 37-42, the subject of the Old Testament lesson for this Sunday’s lectionary), and then, finally, their entrance into the land God had promised to Abraham and his descendants (vss. 43-45).

The Psalm then closes with the cry, “Praise the Lord!” God has been so good to Israel in the way he has worked in their history. And so God will be good to any people whom God has chosen and called to covenant with Him!

**Matthew 20:1-16** is actually a lesson in kingdom economics. As such, it requires examination on three levels.

Let us first review the parable itself. “For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard”, Jesus begins the parable. In this parable, the owner of the vineyard contracts with day-laborers to work in his vineyard all day (presumably from sun-up (6:00 a.m.) to sun-down (6:00 p.m.), and for that labor, he will pay them the customary rate. They agree. But during the day, the vineyard owner hires additional workers at 9:00 a.m., 12:00 noon, 3:00 p.m. and then 5:00 p.m. When the day’s work ends, the owner orders the paymaster to pay the workers, starting with those last hired and ending with those first hired. To those laborers hired at 5:00 p.m., he pays a full day’s wages. The first

hired, observing the owner's generosity toward those hired at 3:00 and 5:00 p.m. quickly do their own calculation of what they will be paid, given the owner's reimbursement of those last hired. They rub their hands together in glee and the unexpected windfall they anticipate receiving.

However, to their utter amazement, when it becomes their time to be paid, they are reimbursed the exact amount of money with which they were contracted – a standard day's labor! Their reaction is predictable. Jesus tells us, "When they received (the wages to which they had earlier agreed), they grumbled against the landowner, saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat'" (vss. 11-12). But Jesus has the vineyard owner respond in this way to the workers' spokesmen.

"Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous" (vss. 13-15)?

Then Jesus concludes, "So the last will be first, and the first will be last" (vs. 16)!

This parable can – and should – be read on three levels. The lowest level is the simple story itself. The response of the vineyard workers to the same pay for all workers, whether they are employed just a few hours before quitting time or whether they have "borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat" is, "This is not fair!" Caught in a similar situation, this would be our response as well. "This is not fair!" The assumption of these workers and of most people is that life ought to be fair – that is, that all people should be treated similarly, and that what God is about in both the Old and New Testaments is acting in society so that everyone will be treated fairly. But what these day laborers and what all those who heard this parable (and would all react as did those day laborers) do not appreciate is that the Bible is not about fairness. It is about justice-filled grace. And the difference between the two is profound.

The story is therefore told by Jesus to get a reaction out of his hearers. And that reaction is "This isn't fair". It is told in order to expose to Jesus' listeners how much all of us operate out of an unconscious perception of life as being about fairness. The story is told to bring that unconscious assumption to conscious articulation. The reason why is that if the unconscious assumption is not brought to conscious articulation, then the people will never understand, much less embrace the economics of the kingdom of God for themselves. And the reason why they won't embrace those economics is because their unarticulated but assumed belief of "life should be fair" will keep on getting in the way. That belief must be purged if one is to embrace kingdom economics. And that brings us to the second level of the understanding of this parable.

In this parable, Jesus teaches that the new order of the shalom community will not be based upon fairness but upon justice-centered grace. Fairness is built upon an emphasis on what one *gets* with the assumption that such fairness must be distributed in a preconceived formula of equity. Thus, when a child says that something is not fair, he means that he hasn't gotten what he thinks he ought to receive. If someone else had been deprived of that cherished object or position, that child would likely not have protested; his protest is centered on his perception that it is he who is being slighted! Thus, fairness is always in the sight of the beholder.

Justice-centered grace is something else entirely. The kingdom of heaven is built upon justice-centered grace – upon what one is given by God – and therefore upon generosity. “Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me”, the owner rhetorically asks? The kingdom comes to us as gift, and so must we be gift to each other. Rather than being possessed by the drive to get for ourselves everything that we believe should come to us, we should be motivated by how to work for a society that will protect the most vulnerable and will combine justice with mercy. Rather than being fixated upon what each of us is able to get, a truly just society is centered on how to guarantee that the most vulnerable are equitably protected – even at sacrifice to me. The focus is on them, not on us! And the focus is on giving, not getting!

In other words, when a society or an economic order is “fair” and is thus built around getting, of acquiring what is “legitimately mine”, that society will inevitably and eventually become greedy, exploitive, oppressive, controlling and dominating. When, on the other hand, a society is based upon justice-filled grace in which the perception is that all of life is a gift and our only concern is to be sure that that gift is equitably distributed, then that society will tend to be generous, giving, relational, just and equitable. Thus, Jesus concludes this parable, “the last will be first and the first will be last”. This is the nature of the upside-down kingdom. Those demanding their rights will get no more than their rights – and that most reluctantly. Those open to the gift of God’s grace that is shared equitably with all will live life as a gift. If they live life giving life away, they will inevitably receive far more than what they anticipated would be given to them! And that brings us to the third level of this parable.

What Jesus is teaching his hearers in this parable is the nature of kingdom economics. And such economics are built upon justice-centered grace, not upon fairness.

There are several statements Jesus makes in this story that first-century Jews, hearing this story, would immediately understand and apply to what he was saying. Those statements, combined together, offer to Jesus’ listeners an entirely different economy – a different way of conducting business, if you will – than that which they customarily follow (and to which they acquiesce). Because we are so little acquainted with the political and economic realities of Jesus’ day, those statements simply pass us by without both the recognition and the response they are designed to evoke. Let’s look at those statements, and thereby discern the economic theory Jesus is setting forth in this parable.

“The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard” (20:1). The parable begins with a rush, for Jesus likens the kingdom of heaven to a landowner. This would have created an immediate cognitive dissonance in Jesus hearers (most of whom were peasants). “The kingdom of heaven”, of course, was Jesus’ code-words for the world as God intended it to be, the shalom community. A landowner, on the other hand, would have been seen by the people as the exact opposite of the kingdom of God. It would be comparable to our saying today, “The kingdom of God is like a communist dictator!” Who wants to be in a kingdom ruled by a communist dictator?

Why did landowners have such bad press in first century Galilee? Landowners were a part of Israel’s elite (they could also be Gentiles) who owned great estates which, when farmed,

provided the economic backbone of the nation. Farmers didn't own the farms they worked; rather, they worked the land of others under contract to those landowners. Most landowners required 50% of the crop the farmers planted and harvested on their land as payment for the use of that land. Out of the remaining 50%, the typical peasant farmer had to pay half in government taxes and 20% of that 50% in Temple tithes. It was only the remainder (15% of the original 100% crop) that the farmer got to keep, and out of that he would have to take all operating costs of his farm, seed and fertilizer for the next year, pay village taxes and support his family. The result was that peasants hated landowners, and saw them as oppressive, exploitive and forcing them to live near poverty.<sup>1</sup>

But this opening sentence also tells us this landowner was an owner of a vineyard. This compounded even further the dark portrait of the kingdom of God as a landowner. Of any landowner hated by the peasants, the one most hated was the owner of a vineyard. The reason was the nature of a vineyard. Vineyards produced, not a staple of the economy (wheat, barley, rye) but a luxury item (wine) sold to the wealthy. Further, the care of a vineyard did not require a small number of farmers who would work that land for many years and who would develop a continuing relationship with the owner, but an army of expendables who could be hired by the day, worked hard and thus exploited by the owner. The expendables, of course, were the bottom of the social pyramid of Israel, making up between 5% and 15% of the population (according to whether economic times were good or bad); these were the people who had slid out of being a peasant because of their economic collapse, and who had now become the detritus of Jewish society.<sup>2</sup> They had likely been forced off their farms by debt foreclosure or by inadequate yield, they were without artisan skills, and all they had to commend them was their muscles and strong backs! These were the beggars, widows, orphans, criminals, shepherds and lepers of Israel, and they were hired at the lowest possible scale as day-laborers by vineyard owners to trim their vines, weed their lands and harvest their crops.

This landowner, who is likened to the kingdom of heaven (thus creating the most extreme cognitive dissonance) has gone to the marketplace "early in the morning" to "hire day-laborers (i.e., "expendables") for his vineyard". He contracts with them to work for "the usual daily wage" – that is, one denarius, the minimum wage of Israel that allowed a person or family to sustain only a subsistence existence. Thus far, this landowner is acting just like any other vineyard owner. There is nothing remarkable or discernibly "heavenly" about him!

Throughout the day, the vineyard owner returns to the marketplace, where he keeps on hiring more workers. This was not at all unusual, since during grape harvest, vineyard owners were concerned about getting those grapes picked as quickly as possible in order to make the best wine. Therefore, they would keep hiring more and more workers in order to maximize production. Jesus tells us that he contracted with each person he hired for "whatever is right" – that is, what the workers (and, presumably, those listening to Jesus' parable) would assume would be the appropriate proportion of one denarius. Again, there is nothing remarkable or

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<sup>1</sup> See my book *Transforming Power* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), pp. 61-64 and its accompanying footnote for further reading and documentation on this subject.

<sup>2</sup> See my book, *Building A People of Power* (Waynesboro, GA: World Vision Press, 2005), pp. 33-35 and footnotes for other sources.

discernibly “heavenly” about this landowner. Why, then, would Jesus be comparing him to the kingdom of heaven?

The workday is completed. The day laborers gather to be paid. The normal process for such payment, as dictated by Deuteronomy 24:14-15, is that the latest hired are paid first while the first hired (who get the largest agreed-upon amount) get paid last. Again, nothing discernibly “heavenly”. But then the story Jesus is telling breaks the anticipated mold that everyone sitting around and listening is expecting.

“When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage” (vs. 10). Now, *this* is different! Those working only one or two hours receive a full denarius. Is this land owner crazy? How can he afford such generous wages? Paying these workers like this will surely bankrupt him! Jesus’ listeners are stunned, speechless with what they are hearing.

But then the story continues, becoming even more puzzling. “And when the last received one denarius, they first thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage” (vs. 11)! Both the day laborers in the parable and all those listening to the story were doing hasty mathematics in their heads. Following the precedent the land owner had set in his payment of the last hired laborers, the first hired should get something between six and twelve denarii – a very handsome payment for that day! How quickly gift had become expectation, that generosity had become the normal payment! And that was manifested in the rage of those first hired! They complained, and complained bitterly.

The response of the landowner to the disenchanted workers begins now to expose what Jesus meant when he said, “The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner”. The landowner responds, “I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?”

The economy of the kingdom of God is not about fairness; it is about justice-filled grace. It is, first, about grace. Nothing is “owed” any of us; everything that we have or possess is a gift from God. As Moses said to the Israelites before they arrived in the Promised Land, “Yahweh your God is bringing you into the land to give you – a land filled with large cities that you did not build, houses filled with all sorts of goods that you did not fill, hewn cisterns that you did not hew, vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant” (Deut. 6:10-11). That is, all of life is a gift to you, a gift you do not deserve and which you have not earned. Life itself is a precious gift to you. So treat it and all you have as such, becoming stewards of the wealth (however little [an expendable] or much [a landowner]) God has given you and use that wealth for the good of your society. The economics of the kingdom of God is built on grace, not on what you deserve nor earn, a wealth that God can distribute as God desires.

But the economy of the kingdom is, by its very nature, disruptive and therefore transforming. It disrupts the status quo, the way that society has conventionally functioned in the past as it centers its conventional economy on getting rather than giving, and thus producing the fruits of greed, exploitation, oppression and domination. “Are you envious because I am generous?” What the Greek actually says is, “Is your eye evil because I am good?” Because God seeks to

build into people generosity, compassion, equitable sharing, the desire for justice – will that get out of you an evil response that will seek to stop that good simply because you are not personally benefiting? Because I am choosing to act compassionately toward those one-hour laborers, will you give them the evil eye? Will you resent their good fortune? Or will you “rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep” (Rom. 12:15)? The economy of God’s kingdom will be a sharing and mutually supportive economy, where each person – whether landowner or expendable -- becomes concerned with the economic welfare of every other person, rejoices in their good-fortune and works for the equitable sharing of wealth so that no one is an expendable any longer but all live life as God intended it to be lived (Isaiah 65:17-25).

This is how “the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner”. For that landowner inexplicably, unpredictably, apparently on the whim of it, chose to act generously and compassionately toward a part of his workforce (and perhaps those who least deserved such generosity). By doing so, that landowner is now encouraged to turn into a way of life for himself that single good action, and to urge all his peers to do the same. Thus, by doing so, kingdom economics will no longer disrupt the standard economy but will convert it into what God intends it to be. And people will live together economically as God intends them to live. Do we have the guts to do this?

There is one more statement to note. Jesus, in describing the response of the day-long laborers, said “they grumbled against the landowner” (vs. 11). In today’s Old Testament lesson, the Israelites “grumbled against Moses and Aaron” (Exod. 16:2). Grumbling seems to be what we tend to be most about, so that what was a gift becomes an expectation, what was an act of grace now becomes an obligation. As the Israelites grumbled against Moses and therefore against Yahweh for the danger of confronting Pharaoh, for apparent entrapment at the Reed Sea and for the lack of bread and meat in the wilderness, so these Israelites (the full day-laborers) grumbled at the landowner for not paying them with the generosity he exhibited toward their fellow workers. Grumbling seems to be a predictable response of people, exhibiting our discontent with anything that doesn’t benefit us directly and immediately. But God’s Kingdom is much more than immediate gratification, about being fair. It is about doing justice and receiving grace – and thus becoming instruments of God as God seeks to transform society – even economically, through us!

**Philippians 1:21-30** begins, in the lectionary, reflection upon Paul’s letter to the Church at Philippi. The letter is, in reality, a thank-you letter, as Paul expresses his gratitude to the Philippian Church for the gift they had collected for him during his imprisonment in Rome, and carried to him by one of their members, Epaphroditus (2:29-30). But the letter also gives Paul a chance to encourage the church in the trials they are facing because of Roman persecution and to urge them toward both greater unity and a deeper commitment to the gospel and its society-transforming power. It was written around 63 or 64 A.D.

In seeking to encourage his friends in Philippi (this letter is his most personal and affectionate letter), Paul writes of his imprisonment by the empire in Rome. He shares with his beloved Philippians that his imprisonment by the “Powers” of Rome initially looked like a tragedy to him, when it occurred. But now he has come to recognize that it has become a blessing because



it has created the opportunity for sharing the gospel to Roman officialdom. As well, it has led to a new boldness of witness throughout the Church (1:12-14).

Some Christians, as a result of this breakthrough, are preaching the gospel out of pure motives. Still others are taking advantage of Paul's imprisonment to preach Christ in a way that is contributing to their personal gain (vss. 15-17). But "what does it matter? Just this: that Christ is proclaimed in every way out of false motives or true, and in that I rejoice" (vs. 18).

Whatever happens to him, Paul writes, it will turn out for the advancement of the gospel. It may not turn out for his personal benefit or comfort; he may have to suffer torture and even death. But the point is that his imprisonment, rather than it intimidating or deflating the church, has had precisely the exact opposite effect. It has emboldened the Christian community to become much more assertive in facing and dealing powerfully with the powerful of Rome and to proclaim the gospel. Paul puts this insight into the most stirring of words.

"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 my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain" (vss. 20-21)!

Paul then speculates on his own future – whether he will be put to death by Rome or whether God will permit him to live (vss. 22-26). He thinks he will win his case before the Roman court (he is accused of the crime of treason), will be exonerated, released and will continue to live for a long time. And he thinks that will happen because that will most benefit and strengthen the Church (vss. 24-25). But he could lose the case and be executed by Rome! No matter! Whatever is the outcome, God is going to be glorified and the gospel enhanced. And that makes Paul rejoice (vs. 18).

What Paul is presenting here is the exercise of relational power over against unilateral power. The power of Rome was the power of its political system, its military, its laws and its dominance of the world. It was "top-down", unilateral power that sought to impose its will upon the rest of the world by whatever means it could exercise. Over against that stood the relational power of the church. Rather than the "power over" of the Romes of the world, relational power is "power with", shared power, mutual power, reciprocal power. It is not the power of weakness, of acquiescence, of apathy. It is direct, specific, realistic, flexible, accountable and negotiable. It is a power that is built upon the relationships one has carefully built with others and that seek the good of the other as well as one's self. Therefore, it is a power that seeks "not to be served but to serve" even if that means giving one's life as "a ransom for many" (Mk. 10:42-45). Such relational power was most manifested before Rome by Paul. But it was the power moving through the warp-and-woof of the church, including the Philippian Church. And it could not be stamped out or even controlled by Rome, for if Rome got rid of the Pauls of Christianity, there would be many more people ready to become a Paul in his stead.

Paul's projection that he would be exonerated and would live was proven wrong. He lost his case rather than winning it. And the result was his execution. But his execution neither stopped nor even intimidated the church. Rather, the churches rose to the challenge, creating a new generation of leadership to take the place of Peter, Paul and John – Christianity's earliest leaders.

And rather than being crushed by the persecution that descended upon them from Rome, they were enlivened by such persecution, becoming increasingly engaged in public life, proclaiming the gospel wherever they went and building the most resilient and city-engaged congregations as a result of their work. So, I believe that Paul went to his death with a victorious heart, firmly believing that even his death would result in the furtherance of Christ and the building of God's Kingdom of shalom!

Paul ends the first chapter of the book of Philippians with a paragraph that encourages them to be faithful to the gospel and to stay the course, even in the face of the most intense persecution and threat of suffering. "Live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel" (1:27).

Paul shares this insight with the Philippian Church because he wants to prepare them for the persecution and suffering that he knows is inevitably before them. He thus ends this chapter with a most profound statement on suffering. "God has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him, as well" (1:29). These are hard words, but they are honest words. One hardly looks at suffering as a privilege! But it is important to do so, Paul is suggesting in these words. For it indicates a degree of confidence and investment in us by God, for he considers us capable and even willing to accept the suffering that must occur if a new world is to be born. For suffering is very basic to life – especially to new life. As it is so beautifully stated in an old Buddhist saying, "Suffering is the one promise that life always keeps, so that when happiness comes, we know it as a precious gift that is ours only for a brief time".

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