

A Work Begun

Preached on The Twenty-second Sunday after Trinity

Trinity Anglican Church, WRJ

Nov. 13, 2022

Texts: Phil. 1: 3-11; Matt. 18: 21-35

Today's Epistle lesson comes from St. Paul's letter to the Church at Philippi. Along with Colossians, Ephesians and Philemon, the Epistle to the Philippians belongs to the time of St. Paul's final imprisonment in Rome, and in today's lesson he refers to the "bonds" of that captivity. The Christians at Philippi had sent him a gift, by the hands of Epaphroditus, together with news of their community, and his letter is basically an acknowledgement of the gift, and a response to the news. It's a very personal letter, full of affection.

Philippi was a city in eastern Macedonia, founded by King Philip, the father of Alexander the Great, in the 4th century B.C. Later on, it was a Roman colony, and in 4 B.C., it was the scene of a decisive battle in which Anthony and Octavian defeated Brutus and Cassius. The city had great strategic importance, because it stood at a break in the mountains, through which all traffic from Asia Minor to Europe would normally pass. St. Paul first visited it in the course of his second missionary journey. Perhaps you remember the story in Acts 16 which tells how he had a vision, calling him to Macedonia, and how he and Barnabas immediately set out for Philippi. That is really one of the great dramatic moments in the history of Christian and European civilization: St. Paul crosses over from Asia to Europe and the seed of the Gospel is first planted in European soil.

Now Paul is at the end of all his missionary journeys, and soon to be a martyr. He writes to the Philippians, and the letter exudes thanksgiving and confidence—thankful, not only for their gift, but above all for their "fellowship in the Gospel from the first day until now", and confident that "he who has begun a good work in them will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ." He urges them to make their conduct worthy of the Gospel of Christ, to give up the rivalries and personal vanities which mar their fellowship. He sets before them the example of the humility of Christ, who "took the form of a servant and became obedient unto death." In that spirit, they must be forgiving and forbearing in their love for one another.

The same teaching is presented in today's Gospel lesson. Jesus, in his parable of the debtors, speaks of our heavenly Father's compassion and forgiveness as an example for us in our dealings with one another. Should we forgive seven times, as the Law requires? No, until seventy times seven—in other words, until we have lost all count. So great is God's mercy towards us.

We must forgive our fellows the sins which they commit against us, which are minuscule compared with the sins we have committed against God and yet have been

forgiven. In the Lord's Prayer, we pray: "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." Another translation which is sometimes used makes the message even more clear: "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors."

Here are some questions we all need to ask ourselves. To whom have we refused forgiveness, either openly, or secretly in our heart? And conversely, from whom should we ask forgiveness? With whom should we be reconciled today? This is serious business. Our stiff-necked refusal to forgive and really forget may be the stumbling block which prevents us from entering the Kingdom of Heaven, and the reason we may be delivered to the tormentors.

Someone once said, "It is easier to forgive an enemy than a friend." Those who are able to wound us most are those in whom we trusted. Yet, as George Herbert said, "He that cannot forgive others breaks the bridge over which he himself must pass if he would ever reach heaven; for everyone has need to be forgiven."

These Epistle and Gospel lessons seem to have a particular significance just now, as we draw near the conclusion of the Church's year. The lessons for the last few Sundays in the Trinity season seem to offer a kind of summing up, a reflecting on the past, and a necessary taking of stock as we approach Advent. We look back with thankfulness for a good work begun in us, for the word of the Gospel established in us, planted and growing in our hearts. But we also look back on areas where we fall short, things we have done or left undone, of which we need to repent. This very ability to be honest about our sins without being crushed by that realization is also the result of God's mercy.

No doubt our Christian life has been marred by mistakes, and deficiencies of one kind or another, just as with all Christians past and present—even with the Christians at Philippi. But if we are sorry for these failures, that is evidence that God is at work. It is an indication of our continuing conversion that we cringe at our past selfishness or unkindness. This shows that there is some spiritual life in us. We would have to wonder about the "faith" of a Christian who is never sorry about anything.

If we *are* sorry, then praise God! The Spirit is at work in us. He convicts, but he also encourages. The Lord has sown the seed of eternal life in our hearts, and he has brought us together in a community of faith. For all that, we must be infinitely thankful. His compassion fails not; his love is new every morning. Our complaints, grievances, and pet peeves seem quite petty when placed beside what God has done for us, when placed beside the riches of his mercy. To be sure, God's work is not complete or perfect in us. As St. Paul tells the Philippians, "Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own." (3: 12) A beginning has been made, a seed has been planted, the seed of new life in God's Kingdom. That seed, says Jesus, is like the mustard seed, the least of all seeds, so tiny we can hardly see it. But when it sprouts and grows up, it becomes a great tree, so that the birds of the air come to lodge in its branches. The seed of God's Kingdom is tiny and hidden, and only by faith do we discern it at all. It seems the least of all seeds. But give thanks for that seed. Cherish it

and nourish it. It will spring up, and all the virtues of heaven will lodge in its branches, so that, as St. Paul says in today's lesson,

“our love may abound yet more and more in knowledge and in all judgment: that ye may approve things that are excellent; that ye may be sincere, and without offence till the day of Christ; being filled with the fruits of righteousness, which are by Jesus Christ, unto the glory and praise of God.”

Certainly there's plenty to complain about, if we have a mind to complain. And our sins can get us down, leading to discouragement. But today's lessons urge us to a different perspective. Instead of complaining or losing heart at the great distance between who we are and who we should be, let us give thanks for what God has done for us and in us, and let that consideration be the basis of our life together.

William Cowper, an eighteenth-century poet, puts it nicely:

Have we no words? ah, think again;
Words flow apace when we complain,
And fill our fellow-creature 's ear
With the sad tale of all our care.
Were half the breath thus vainly spent
To heaven in supplication sent,
Our cheerful song would oftener be
'Hear what the Lord hath done for me.

Let us thank God, who has indeed begun a good work in us, and will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ.

In the Name...