

## No Matter What: Shine

### Philippians 2:12-18

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Jeff Marian

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Fraternity houses are not usually known for leading people to faith in Jesus. They're better known for toga parties, cheap beer and the most disgusting bathrooms on planet earth. But while the Delta Upsilon fraternity house on the University of North Dakota campus did indeed have toga parties and cheap beer, it was there that I really came to know Jesus. There were no revivals or altar calls. In fact, no one preached to me at all. Instead, it was something about the lives of three of my fraternity brothers. In addition to being uncommonly kind, there was a peace about them, a sense of being comfortable in their own skin which I sorely lacked but desperately wanted in my life. And when I finally mustered up the courage to ask them about it, all three of them talked about their faith in Jesus. Long story short, I'm here today because of them. I'm here today because their faith shined and illuminated for me the kind of life I wanted. And I found that life in Jesus.

I don't know how familiar those three fraternity brothers were with Paul's letter to the Philippians, but they were living out exactly what Paul talks about in our scripture reading today. Before we dive in, let me set the context. While Paul was in prison for preaching the Gospel, the Philippian Christians were suffering from persecution in Philippi. Remember, Philippi was filled with retired Roman military and had a strong loyalty to Rome. But the Philippian Christians were proclaiming Jesus as king, not Caesar. And they were paying the price for professing their faith.

Paul knew what was happening to them, but rather than instructing these new Christians on how to hide and save themselves, Paul instructed them on how to be a bold witness to Christ by the way that they lived. And there's one more piece of context that's important to know. Paul believed that Jesus' return to earth was imminent. Paul believed that any day Jesus was going to return as king to establish God's reign on earth. And that helps to explain Paul's sense of urgency in this passage. With that, let's dive in with verse 12. Paul writes,

***Dear friends, you always followed my instructions when I was with you. And now that I am away, it is even more important. Work hard to show the results of your salvation, obeying God with deep reverence and fear.***

Please don't miss what this verse is saying. It's so important! So many people have been led to believe that Christianity is all about getting into heaven when you die.

In addition, they fear that they aren't good enough or haven't done enough to earn God's love and forgiveness. But Paul turns that thinking on its head.

Paul knows that salvation is God's work, and it's a gift. We can't buy it. We can't earn it. We can't work for it. We don't have to be "good enough" to receive it. God has chosen to love and forgive us. The cross of Christ cries, "This is how far I'll go to show you that I love you." For Lutherans, baptism is God's promises embodied in water. And I especially love infant baptism because it reminds us that we all receive the gift of salvation like a helpless child. And then, as we grow, we place our faith in the promise that we are loved, forgiven, named and claimed as a child of God. We may change throughout our lives. We may struggle with doubts. We might even turn our backs on the faith. But God's promise never changes. That's salvation.

But then Paul makes it clear that we spend the rest of our lives showing the results of our salvation. Or, as some translations put it, "working out" our salvation. Not only does God's love change us but the Holy Spirit – God's living presence within us – is at work in us shaping our hearts and minds more and more into the likeness of Jesus. We no longer live for ourselves. We live for Christ, and we do that by living for others.

Let me put this another way. We sometimes think that we can "do" our way into being", that we can somehow do enough to earn the right to be called children of God. But it's the other way around. God declares that we are beloved children. God changes our being, and that changes our doing. It compels and empowers us to live differently.

Benjamin Zander, in his marvelous book "The Art of Possibility" tells the story of a music class that he teaches. All these music students come from all over the world to learn from Zander who is a master conductor. And Zander discovered that all these students were constantly comparing themselves to one another, wondering if they were good enough. And so, what Zander does is that on the first day of class he tells his students that every one of them gets an "A". Before they do anything in that class, every student gets an "A" as their final grade. And Zander has found over time that when these young musicians begin to think of themselves as "A" students they begin to practice and play like "A" students. Benjamin Zander knows that our doing comes from our being. Paul knows that the Philippians are beloved children of God. They are all "A" students. That's the gift of salvation. And so Paul calls them to live into that identity more and more each day.

That's amazing, but what Paul says next is even more amazing. Paul writes in verse 13,

***For God is working in you, giving you the desire and the power to do what pleases him.***

This is such a powerful and hopeful verse. While we're working out our salvation, God is working in us. According to Paul God is changing our desires, transforming our hearts to want what God wants and to love what God loves. And then, God empowers us to live that out. Our life of faith isn't about working hard to be good. It's about trusting the work of God in us and through us. This process of being shaped and empowered by God, known as "sanctification", doesn't happen overnight. It's not like a light switch for most of us. Instead, it's a lifelong process.

Perhaps we could think of ourselves like apples on a tree. Apples don't work hard to ripen. It's a natural process that happens over time. Similarly, we don't work hard to "ripen" into Christlikeness. Instead, we love and forgive as God gives us grace. And we try and fail and learn and try again. And we do it all, not fearing that God will reject us if we don't get it right. We do it all because we trust in God's love and forgiveness, and because we trust that God, through the Spirit, is at work in us.

Let's continue with verses 14-15. Paul writes, ***Do everything without complaining and arguing, so that no one can criticize you. Live clean, innocent lives as children of God, shining like bright lights in a world full of crooked and perverse people.***

Paul reminds the Philippians that how they live is a witness to the people around them. If they spend their time complaining and arguing with one another...what kind of witness to God is that? That would make them no different than the culture around them. Paul urges them to live in a way that stands apart from the rest of the culture, just as my fraternity brothers did. A community that is positive, agreeable, affirming, loving and nurturing...that kind of community shines like a candle on a dark night.

Some years ago, I was at a leadership retreat in Jackson Hole, Wyoming that combined clergy and business leaders. One night at dinner I sat next to a young woman who is a prominent newscaster on local television. We got to talking and I asked her if she attended a church in Twin Cities. She hemmed and hawed for a minute and then said, almost as if she were apologizing, that she and her husband had become Mormons a few years before. When I asked her about that she said that they had neighbors who were Mormon and the way they were dedicated to their families and to one another, and to their faith community was so compelling that they wound up joining the church. I left that dinner wondering if my life is compelling enough, if it shines brightly enough against the culture around me, to compel others to want to know more about Jesus. Is yours?

Finally, Paul closes this section with these words, ***Hold firmly to the word of life; then, on the day of Christ's return, I will be proud that I did not run the race in vain and that my work was not useless. But I will rejoice even if I lose my life, pouring it out like a liquid offering to God, just like your faithful service is an offering to God. And I want all of you to share that joy. Yes, you should rejoice, and I will share your joy.***

As I mentioned earlier, Paul thought that Jesus' return was imminent. But as time passed it became increasingly clear that that wasn't the case. Still the early Christians lived in expectation of Jesus' return. But they didn't sit on a mountain top and wait. They lived lives that they believed would honor their King.

Here's how one theologian put it, "Love of neighbor and hospitality to strangers was early Christians' surest response to life on the brink of the end-times. They gathered and worshiped God. They ministered to the poor. They visited prisoners. They broke bread together, they sang hymns. Early Christians nurtured community. By their lifestyle of love and welcome, early Christians resisted the claims of the empire. People around them marveled at their joy and boldness."

Like those early Christians, we don't know when Jesus will return. Perhaps he's already returned in you and me. But however it plays out, let's live as if it's tomorrow. Let's live as bright lights in a world of darkness. Not just so that Jesus will be proud of us on the day he returns, but because the world is filled with people who are just like I was back in college...hungry for more life, more peace and more aliveness. And they're watching, looking for someone who seems to have what they long for. The question I'll leave you with is this: will they see it in you and me?

Let's pray....

God who spoke light into being, we pray that by your grace our lives might reflect the light of your love and your grace in everything that we think, say and do. Cleanse us of those things that might dim our living witness. May others see Christ in us, be drawn to you and entrust their lives to the Good News of your love and forgiveness. For you are hope for the hopeless. Rest for the weary. Help for the hurting. We pray this in the strong name of Christ and together all God's people said, "Amen."