

Preserving Joy in Ministry *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*

The Church as Colony of Heaven *Philippians 3:17 – 21*

Introduction: Feeling Like a Foreigner

During my junior year in high school, I took a trip where I went somewhere feeling like a foreigner, but came back home feeling like even more of a foreigner. I was invited by my friend to a spring break trip to Mexicali, Mexico. Since we were in the Los Angeles, CA area, Mexico wasn't too far away. I went, thinking that we would do things like build houses, like Habitat for Humanity does. Instead, we played with kids. And I didn't like kids. We played soccer with them, and I didn't like soccer because I swam and played water polo. And we told these kids Bible stories, which was awkward for me because I wasn't a Christian. I knew that this trip was organized through a Christian organization, though. And I went as part of a church that I had been attending for the past ten months or so. So I wasn't tricked into going or anything. But I did feel like a foreigner there. I represented a naive American, I think. I had never seen poverty like I saw there. We camped out in tents on a dry, cracked riverbed. We couldn't drink the water from the tap because the water wasn't clean. And I don't even remember the bathrooms so I must have blocked it out of my mind. For most of the time, I felt uncomfortable and secretly wished that I hadn't agreed to come. It was the middle of the competitive swimming season, and no serious athlete takes a whole week off of training. But again it was the kids who challenged me the most. Almost despite myself, I started to love them. I started to care about what they and their families went through, why they were stuck in this very deep poverty. And I realized that I was deeply selfish. I wanted to go home, but I looked around and saw over two thousand other people who really valued being there, and even enjoyed serving there. They said they knew Jesus. At the end of that week, after I had been learning about Jesus and reading the New Testament for about a year by that point, I gave my life to Jesus. When I got back home, I felt like a foreigner in a different kind of way. I questioned why I had clean, running water and flush toilets while many people in Mexicali didn't. But also, my family was not a Christian family. My dad was an atheist-agnostic type. He loved science and he liked asking me tough questions about faith and science. My mom had roots in the Japanese Buddhism she grew up with, and she had pragmatic questions about what believing in Jesus meant practically. So I felt challenged. I felt like I was now a different person at home because I was now representing Jesus.

Relevance:

You might feel that way at times. Sometimes you go to a class and know that if you wanted to talk about Jesus, that the reaction would not be too warm. Maybe you have friends who are committed to something else, so talking about Jesus gets you the glassy eyes and then a change in conversation.

Context:

We're in Paul's letter to the Philippians. The city of Philippi is in eastern Macedonia. Now the apostle Paul, this brilliant Jewish Christian leader, had arrived in Philippi in 49 or 50 CE. He preached. People gave their lives to Jesus. And a Christian community started to thrive there. That is narrated in Acts 16. This is a letter where Paul is really proud of the community he's sending this letter to. That doesn't happen that often! Now there are some disagreements that he speaks to, which are pragmatic and not theological. So it's not that they are problem-free.

And it's also not that they are temptation-free. One temptation was to have their Gentile Christian men get circumcised like Jewish men. Now why in the world would that be a temptation? Is that such an attractive idea, inherently? No! It's because the Roman Empire recognized Judaism as an official religion. So the Jewish community - as marked off by Jewish men - were exempted from bowing down to Caesar. 'Look you just don't want to make Jewish people do that, okay?!' And Jewish men were exempted from serving in the Roman army. So there were huge perks for just a few days of pain. And besides: Don't Christians belong do Judaism anyway? So look, there were real temptations then as now: Don't put Jesus front and center. Hide out under some kind of cover.

In response to that, Paul says to them, and I think the Spirit of God is saying to us, ‘Remember to whom you belong.’ Specifically, you are a colony of heaven, not a colony of Rome.

²⁰ For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; ²¹ who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself.

Philippi was a colony of Rome. In late 42 BCE, Octavian and Antony triumphed over Cassius and Brutus at the Battle of Philippi. The veterans wanted their due: the land in Italy they had been promised. But that land had already been settled. So Octavian and Antony released some veterans from their army to resettle the city of Philippi, which had originally been founded by Philip of Macedon about 300 years before that. It was renamed *Colonia Victrix Philippensium*, or the Colony of Victory at Philippi. When Octavian became Emperor (in 30 BCE), he reorganized the city and settled even more Roman army veterans there, because the last thing any Emperor wanted was to keep former soldiers in Rome, where they would be unhappy because there wasn’t any land left there. Then they might revolt. The city was physically rebuilt and laid out like a miniature Rome. There was a forum built there, a theater built there; Roman games were held there. Point being, most resettled Roman soldiers and their families thought of themselves as a colony of Rome. The original inhabitants of Philippi also understood that they had been *colonized*. Roman culture was forced upon them everywhere and in every way. And if status of a colony was such that if a colony was threatened, then the Emperor would come to save it.

Here, Paul says that because these Philippians came to Jesus, they are a colony of heaven. Jesus has colonized the earth. Not in the way Europe colonized other parts of the world, with guns and power and laws to their advantage. But with love and humility and self-sacrifice. So everyone who comes to Jesus becomes a citizen of a kingdom that is a bit far off, but present and coming.

Their citizenship was in heaven, and one day Jesus would return to save them. Now once you live into that story, notice what happens? First of all, it changes all the power dynamics. Whether you are a veteran Roman soldier and liked your privilege, or didn’t want that inheritance, or one of the original inhabitants of the city, suddenly you are swept up in a new identity that breaks into that picture. Here is a picture of the Dakota Access Pipeline protest as of Tuesday, November 1, in an article published by the Baptist News Global Network:¹

¹ Norman Jameson, ‘Clergy From Across U.S. to Stand in Solidarity With Indigenous ‘Water Protectors’ at Standing Rock,’ *Baptist News Global*, November 1, 2016; <https://baptistnews.com/article/clergy-from-across-u-s-to-stand-in-solidarity-with-indigenous-water-protectors-at-standing-rock/#.WBzob9UrKUm>



Clergy from across U.S. to stand in solidarity with indigenous 'water protectors' at Standing Rock

NEWS NORMAN JAMESON | NOVEMBER 1, 2016

15K 412

More than 350 clergy from across the nation have said they will stand with the "water protectors" blockade construction of an oil pipeline adjacent to the Standing Rock Reservation in North Dakota

Here's a Catholic website. Here's a Mennonite website. Here's a list of Christian denominations and groups who have taken action against the Pipeline. Mark Charles, a Navajo Christian and Washington correspondent for Native News Online, says this: "Pray for the wisdom of our tribal leaders. Pray for a post-colonial posture at that table this fall. And pray for the endurance of our Native people. Water is life. It is more important than wealth. It is more valuable than oil. And we (Natives) need to take our seat at the table and instruct this nation of immigrants in what it means to value life and live sustainably here on Turtle Island. And that includes pointing out and addressing the racist foundations the United States of America is built upon..."² Given that this Wikipedia page exists ('List of Pipeline Accidents in the United States in the 21st Century'), and is just one of many, this is a big issue.

Now there's a lot to say about the Pipeline. But for now, I just want to note that we are seeing Christians participating with others in such a way that demonstrates being a citizen of heaven. Being a colony of another king, a king of kings, means a new solidarity with one another.

Second, being a colony of heaven means that we are an advance guard from the future. In movies, there is a motif of someone coming from the future into the present. It happened in *Batman v. Superman*, when the Flash came back in time to talk to Batman. It happened in the *Terminator* movies, when the Terminator comes back to protect John Connor. It happened in the *Back to the Future* movies, when Doc Brown comes to Marty McFly and says, 'I'm back...from the future!'

Well, there's a very real sense where the church is the outpost that's come from the future, back into the present. When Jesus comes back and when eternity dawns upon us, he will be surrounded by people of every tribe and tongue. That's what Revelation 5 says. So when we gather as a representation of every tribe and tongue, we represent God's future.

Illus: So there is this movie called *RFK in the Land of Apartheid*. It's about Senator Robert F. Kennedy's trip to South Africa in 1966 where he spoke out against Apartheid. He writes, "During five days this summer, my wife Ethel and I visited South Africa, talking to all kinds of people representing all viewpoints. Wherever we went-Pretoria, Cape Town, Durban, Stellenbosch, Johannesburg-apartheid was at the heart of the discussion and debate. Our aim was not simply to criticize but to engage in a dialogue to see if, together, we could elevate reason above prejudice and myth. At the University of Natal in Durban, I

² Mark Charles, 'The Problem with the Dakota Access Pipeline,' *WirelessHogan: Reflections from the Hogan*, September 15, 2016; <http://wirelesshogan.blogspot.com/2016/09/the-problem-with-dakota-access-pipeline.html>

was told the church to which most of the white population belongs teaches apartheid as a moral necessity. A questioner declared that few churches allow black Africans to pray with the white because the Bible says that is the way it should be, because God created Negroes to serve. "But suppose God is black," I replied. "What if we go to Heaven and we, all our lives, have treated the Negro as an inferior, and God is there, and we look up and He is not white? What then is our response?" There was no answer. Only silence.' (August 23, 1966; <http://www.rfksafilm.org/html/media/magazines/look.php>) That's why Jesus taught so much about forgiveness and reconciliation. God is the one who forgives and reconciles. And He calls us to enter into what He's doing. Those who turn away from the love of Jesus are trying to resist the destiny God has planned.

How else is that true? In our character, too. We will finally become who we were always made to be. What Jesus has begun in us now, by empowering us to live out his love, he will complete. In 1 Corinthians 13, the famous chapter about love that is often read at weddings and put on Hallmark cards, Paul says,

⁸Love never fails; but if there are gifts of prophecy, they will be done away; if there are tongues, they will cease; if there is knowledge, it will be done away. ⁹For we know in part and we prophesy in part; ¹⁰but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away. [Then he uses the metaphor of growing up] ¹¹When I was a child, I used to speak like a child, think like a child, reason like a child; when I became a man, I did away with childish things. ¹²For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I will know fully just as I also have been fully known. ¹³But now faith, hope, love, abide these three; but the greatest of these is love.'

The big idea in 1 Corinthians is the future. And if we look ahead, we see that we will be drawn more fully up into the life of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, into the relations of love that are in the Trinity itself. So when we know one another and know Jesus face to face, love will be the one quality that remains. Faith will resolve with sight, and hope will be fulfilled, so in that sense, faith and hope will be fulfilled. But love for God will not be fulfilled because there will be no end to God's love for us, and God's love through us to others and back to Him. In fact, we will only deepen further and further into love, God's true love. The love of God shown in Jesus takes us ever deeper into the reality that is God. Love is not just our duty, although it is a duty. God's love is our destiny.

Illus: Wesley Hill is a New Testament scholar and a Christian man who has same-sex attraction. In a very personal book, he writes, 'Jesus is the model of the fulfilled human being. The Gospels portray a compelling and attractive person, who engages seriously with people and is good company at a party. Yet all the evidence is that he lived as a sexual celibate. It may come as a surprise in our age of personal gratification that Jesus never married and never had sex - with a woman or with a man. He never gave in to any lust. Although he experienced every human temptation (Hebrews 4:15), he never sinned sexually. And he was the fullest, truest human being who has ever lived. Indeed, precisely because he never sinned, he was truly, fully human.' (Wesley Hill, *Washed and Waiting*, p.76 - 77) 'Sexual imagery occurs so often in the Bible as a kind of pointer to the transcendent reality of divine affection. Sexual longing... is a taste or an analogy of what it must mean for God Himself to yearn for a relationship with us.' (p.106) Wesley puts it well. That love of God is our destiny.

Third, being a colony of heaven means that we are the thick presence of God breaking into the thin. Heaven is where God's reign is shown. Jesus taught us to pray, 'Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven' (Mt.6:9 - 13). Heaven is where God's presence is thick, because His reign is done there. Earth is different. It's the territory of the rebels, those who have rebelled against love. That's why we have to pray, especially for ourselves, 'Your will be done [in me or us]... Deliver us from evil.' Now God never gives up on even the most rebellious person. He is always working in people to will something good, even if they direct it to the wrong thing. That's why I think of the church as thickening the presence of God in a world where it is thin.

Our Responsibility: v.17 - 19

What then is our responsibility? If the church really is a colony of heaven, and our citizenship is not American or whatever but in God's kingdom, then how do we live? Paul answers that in v.17 - 19:

¹⁷ Brethren, join in following my example, and observe those who walk according to the pattern you have in us. ¹⁸ For many walk, of whom I often told you, and now tell you even weeping, that they are enemies of the cross of Christ, ¹⁹ whose end is destruction, whose god is their appetite, and whose glory is in their shame, who set their minds on earthly things.

God is their appetite. Some translate that word 'belly,' or others 'stomach.' A few years ago, I was starting to practice the prayer of St. Ignatius, the founder of the Jesuit order. It's a prayer asking God at the end of each day, when had I been most aware of Him, and when had I been least aware of Him. And it struck me that the times I was least aware of God was when there were cookies or brownies or something right in front of me to snack on. I would just take it. It was almost a reflex. I started to just check in with God when I felt hungry or when there were free desserts or snack food in front of me. And I realized that I felt resistance in me to doing that. It wasn't that God would say 'no' to me all the time, if He nudged me at all. It was that I had deeply engrained drives, and insecurities, even. I felt like I needed to maximize every dollar, so if I didn't stuff myself at buffet lines, I was wasting money. Or I felt like I was wasting opportunities to eat in the moment, thinking I won't have to eat as much later. But the truth was that I have a sugar addiction, especially to chocolate. And I had health problems later because of that. But what was most important was that I was being governed by my appetite. What I wanted for other aspects of my life and for other aspects of the world, was for God to break in and bring His future into the present. But I realized that I need to allow God to break into my appetite patterns and interrupt me.

So when Paul says in Philippians that there are people whose god is their appetite, who set their minds of earthly things, that's not hard for me to relate to. And hopefully it isn't for us either. Given our fast food, junk food, sweet tooth culture, it should be easy to relate to. Yes, it might be different in degree. You may know people who get trashed with alcohol every weekend. You might know people who started college saying that they're idealistic but now they want to just make a lot of money. Yes, those are problematic attitudes. It's a problem to prioritize our present over God's future. It's a problem to cultivate an attitude of scarcity and therefore a motivation of fear as opposed to cultivate an awareness of God's promises and therefore a motivation of confidence in Him. It's a problem to feed our appetite and not our imagination about God's kingdom.

That's a big contrast with the mindset of those who are in Jesus in v.20: "But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ." So we live in the reign of Jesus, because we expect him to come here.

Illus: *The Economist* magazine just reviewed a book by Nick Spencer called *The Evolution of the West: How Christianity Has Shaped Our Values*. The reviewer says, 'The Christianisation of Europe, he says, was not a bunch of reactionary clerics trying to shut down a noble, free, secular ancient world, but a new idea of "a voluntary basis for human association in which people joined together through will and love rather than blood or shared material objectives". Christianity declared that humans "have access to the deepest reality as individuals rather than merely as members of a group". Out of this, with a reinjection at the Reformation, came the origins of the modern world: a belief in equality of status as the proper basis for a legal system and the assertion of natural rights leading to individual liberty, as well as the notion that a society built on the assumption of moral equality should have a representative form of government. Shorn of its establishment baggage, Mr Spencer argues, Christianity still has much to say to an amnesiac world about human dignity, political freedom and economic inequality. And, quoting William Wilberforce, he warns that Christian values are inseparable from Christianity itself.'