

“On a Prayer and a Shoestring”
Text: Philippians 4:10-20
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*And my God will fully satisfy every need of yours according to his riches in glory
in Christ Jesus. Philippians 4:19*

The reading we have just heard is taken from one of the oddest thank you notes ever written. For one thing, Paul never says thank you for the gift of money he has received from his friends in Philippi. For another, he indicates that while it was kind of his friends to send a gift, he really didn't need it because he had long ago learned how to do without. It would be as if you had recently gotten married, and you had received from friends of your parents a toaster as a wedding gift. Thank you note time comes around. You sit down and write, “How kind of you to send us a toaster on the occasion of our wedding, but we really can get along without a toaster. Toasted bread or untoasted bread - we are happy either way. But come see us soon.”

The gift that Paul had received from his friends, of course, was much more significant than a kitchen appliance. Paul was in prison; he was in dire straits, perhaps even desperate straits. He was most likely in Rome in a jail cell; his personal situation very difficult. The church in Philippi was in difficult straits as well, very much under persecution by the non-Christian authorities in Macedonia. Yet despite their own deprivation and struggles, they managed over time not to send Paul just one gift of money, but many gifts. In fact, it was the only congregation from whom Paul received regular financial assistance throughout his ministry. It is no wonder that he begins the letter by saying “to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi.” He had deep affection for them, and they for him. They were brothers and sisters in struggle and deprivation, and yet they were incredibly loving to one another and remained joyful, strong people, able to handle whatever life dished out, generously caring for one another in good times and bad.

Perhaps you will think it is a long way from the situation of Paul and the Philippians 2000 years ago to where we are today, two days before Election Day. We are all grateful it is finally rolling around, are we not? Reading this beautiful passage from Philippians reminded me that one of the hallmarks of Christianity throughout the ages has always been concern for the welfare of the other and the understanding that if one suffers, all suffer. If one rejoices, all rejoice. Our Presbyterian forefather John Calvin was convinced that good government was a

gift from God. Why? God established government for the well-being of humanity. What a concept: elected officials supposed to serve the common good.(1) That it's their mission. Government itself, Calvin believed, was a wonderful counterpoint to the temptation of human nature to conclude that what really matters is one's own self and one's own needs.

By this time next Sunday, we will have elected a President and a whole host of senators, and judges, and representatives. I have two hopes for our post-election America: first, that the bitter tide of negativity and ugliness will subside right early; and second, that Americans will come together again in a spirit of mutual concern, remembering that if one suffers, all suffer, and that we must care about those who are left out and beaten down. We must care about and for one another. I hope we can come together in a spirit of healing and hope.

I know nothing about the case except what I have read in the newspaper about the 12-year-old boy from Georgia whose mother drove all the way to Nebraska to take advantage of that state's safe haven law and left her son there because she said she "had run out of hope." I know nothing about the particulars, but when people have no one to turn to, when people are written off by their faith communities, or the larger civic community of which they are a part, it is a sign that we have violated one of the basic morals of human existence given to us by God for how we are to live with one another. Norman Cousins once said that if our American society - if Western civilization goes out of business, if it disappears as the Roman Empire did, it will not be because we have lost our capacity to create art, or to appreciate music, or to write good literature. It will be because we have lost the capacity to feel compassion for our fellow human beings - the capacity to feel compassion, to know what it is like to live in another's skin.

You see compassion demonstrated so beautifully here, with the Philippians who are more than happy to share the little they have. They not only cared, they acted on their compassion. Even though Paul does not say the words "thank you" in his note, gratitude drips from every word in his letter. He has no sense of entitlement, does he, in this letter? He didn't write, "Dear friends, it's about time you remembered I was locked up in jail." He hadn't developed what someone has called the prison personality: pacing the cell, asking the guard every five minutes if the mail has come.(2) He has learned to be okay where ever he is.

And what a transformation this man has undergone since that day on the road to Damascus when he encountered the risen Christ! Before, he had had no use for his fellow human beings. His heart had been hard. He was a persecutor of the followers of Jesus Christ, and then he became an apostle of Jesus Christ. I am convinced that only God can take any of us from where we are to where God needs for us to be and wants for us to be in terms of our capacity for concern for others, in terms of our ability to live in a Christ-like way. Elsewhere in his letter to

the Philippians, Paul writes that he counts as loss everything that he has gained because of Christ.(3:7-11)

I believe in these brief words that we read this morning, there are at least three spiritual principles that can bring about genuine transformation for all of us. The first is obvious. We look at Paul; we hear his words; we realize that all of us need to learn to accept whatever it is that life dishes up. There are so many things over which we have no control, and we will waste an enormous amount of energy railing against those things we can't change. Paul has learned to be content in whatever situation he is in, whether he has a lot or whether he has very little.

Many people are learning what it is to have a little, for the first time, as our economy has become shaky in the extreme. We are all going to learn some new lessons in frugality and modesty. I wonder which is harder though - to be content with a little or to be content with a lot. For some people, the more they have, the more it feels as if they have to have. You may remember that a couple of Sundays ago, I mentioned the seminary students who were railing out against people living in houses too big. The professor asked if there were any kind of house that was really sinful. One of the students answered sheepishly, "Yes, the one that is bigger than mine."

I just returned yesterday from a quick trip to see the grandchildren. The two of them had enough Halloween candy to send a whole population into sugar overload; yet, they were arguing over their candy. The more they had, it seemed, the more tense things were between them.

I was not around in the Depression, but my parents were. They were deeply affected by it. I grew up in a household where socks were darned and hems of dresses were let out to make them last another season. Theirs was "a generation in which people seemed to do things without any expectation of congratulations. The virtues that people admired were the basic ones of loyalty, self-sacrifice, womanliness, manliness, those unsophisticated steadfast qualities that do not necessarily arouse enthusiasm in our day."⁽³⁾ I think that God is giving our whole society a chance for transformation, that we might become better people than we were a year ago, because we are learning the true value of things and how to discern the difference between that which is ultimately satisfying and that which, finally, does not do us much good at all.

I like being at Morningside so much. I like the history of this place, a history marked by more modesty and frugality than most congregations. I read the other day that in 1948, the per capita giving at Morningside was more than double the average than our denomination's per capita giving. Today, we still live according to what I call "candle wax" conservatism. Chris Hawkins knows what I mean - that the candles on the communion table behind me become tiny little stubs before we replace them. We know what it is like to live on a shoestring and a prayer around here. I did some figuring, actually, and discovered that there is a

way to live on half a shoestring and a prayer. If we stop giving to people in need, if we cut out all the people who work as staff, dismissed the conversations and visiting that didn't produce any concrete results, if we decided that the preschool was just a little excessive, in terms of what we are capable of doing because there is the utility bill that has to be paid for building usage seven days a week, we could cut it all out and just gather on Sunday morning from 11 to 12 or 9:45 to 12, and we could make it on half a shoestring. (4) The problem is, we would cease to be Christ's Church in and for the world. I like being part of a church that knows how to add water to the soup, but think what we could do if more of us tried sacrificial giving and came to realize the blessing that comes with putting God first in our lives, not because we have to have more, but because God really is in 2008 calling us to do more.

During these challenging times, the church has an indispensable role to play. Paul had learned how to be content with what he had, but he had also learned how to strike out, to step out, and do what God needed him to do, even if it ended up landing him in a prison cell.

Paul's second principle for faithful living, and those of you who have associations with Alcoholics Anonymous or any addiction program know this by heart: you rely on a higher power. So simple, yet so profound.

When I had been here a year, members of the choir gave me this stole as a present to mark my anniversary. It says, "To the glory of God and in thanksgiving" and then my favorite Bible verse, "I can do all things through him who strengthens me."

How did Martin Luther put it?
*Did we in our own strength confide,
Our striving would be losing;
Were not the right Man on our side,
The Man of God's own choosing.*

Think of your life - the illness that just about did you in, the death of a person you loved most dearly, the loss of a job, the depression that can come from having too little to do, the frustration that comes from having more to do than you can possibly do, yet we can endure all things through him who strengthens us.

The third principle Paul states with glad reassurance, "And my God will fully satisfy every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus." This is really what the letter is all about, and this is really what life is all about - everything understood in the context of the meaning in the life and death and resurrection of Christ Jesus. If we've got that going for us, and if our world has that going for it, then hopelessness is never an option because God will provide everything that we need, through the life and death and resurrection of Christ. I can't explain to you how it works. This is the deepest of all spiritual mysteries, but

I will tell you that at every point in your life, when you think that you are not going to make it, and all the evidence points in the direction that you are not going to make it, you will make it!

I remember standing in the family waiting room outside the ICU at Northside Hospital a few years ago with the father of a son, not long married and a new father himself. The son was dying of a virulent cancer that had come from nowhere and struck him down in only a few months' time. "How are you doing?" I asked the father.

He answered, "A hundred times a day I say to myself, 'God will satisfy every need of yours'. I have never had greater needs than now." The son died. The father survived. And so it goes with our God.

On this birthday Sunday, surely we who love this church must say that God has provided all that we have needed. And can we not say that, because of God's generosity, we have become the joyful, positive and confident congregation that we are, not discouraged by any circumstance, but joyful and generous, glad that every gift we make to the mission of this church is actually a gift to God? Paul reminds us that every gift we make is really *a gift to God, "an offering acceptable and well-pleasing to him."*

At the very end of the letter Paul goes back to the saints: "Greet every saint in Christ Jesus. All the saints [here] greet you...."

Frederick Buechner has written, "To be a saint is not to be perfect. It is to live with courage; it is to live with hands stretched out, both to give and to receive with gladness. It is to be light of heart in the knowledge that there is something greater than the world and all the things that press in on us. That something greater is the grace and love of Christ, strong enough to mend and renew everything that has ever been broken."

I close with this wonderful All Saints story. Reynolds Price, a wonderful writer, tells about two saints in his own life, his grandparents, who were known in their community for their devotion to God. "One winter night they had stayed up unusually late for a family gathering. When at last they had undressed and knelt on opposite sides of the bed for prayer, each went promptly to sleep. Much later in the cold night, the grandfather woke up disgusted. He struggled to his feet, went around the bed, shook his wife's shoulder and said, 'Wake up Lula. Damned if we haven't been praying all night.'"

This is the way to the saintly life: modesty, without self-consciousness or excessive self-concern, but with devotion - devotion to God who has promised to give you the strength to endure and to overcome absolutely everything, through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

(1) Christine Chakoian, "What It Takes to Be a Good Citizen," *The Presbyterian Outlook*, 10/27/08.

(2) Fred Craddock, *Philippians*, John Knox Press, 1985.

(3) George W. Hunt, *America*, 2/25/95.

(4) This idea comes from a sermon preached by Patrick J. Willson at St. Stephen Presbyterian Church, 1/17/93.

(5) *The Magnificent Defeat*.

(6) *Clear Pictures*.