

Alive: Spirit of Life

Philippians 1:12-14; 20-30

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It was a Thursday morning during my sophomore year of high school and I was in our wrestling coaches' classroom along with about a dozen or so other students for SOAP which stood for Students of Active Prayer which was a campus faith club at my high school. I hadn't been going to the group for long, but some of the guys that I sat by at lunch had been inviting me to go pretty regularly, so at this point, I had managed to string together a few sessions.

Towards the end of our time together, about the time they gave us donuts, which was my favorite part, we got an invite to go to Coach's house for another session of Bible study that weekend for what I was told would be the most important night of my life. Seemed pretty important—and they promised more food.

Well, fast forward to that evening and I'd say there were probably 30 or 40 students there. Most of whom I had never seen before and didn't know were Church people. We sang some songs, played some games, and then as we were winding down, one of the leaders started The Pitch.

He said, "we told you that this would be the most important night of your life and here is why. If you were driving home tonight and for some terrible reason, your car skidded off of the road, do you know where you would go? The bible says in Paul's letter to the Romans, "I declare that if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that he was raised from the dead that you will be saved." So, close your eyes and bow your heads. If you would like to be saved tonight, then raise your hands."

So, pause there. Cards on the table. I'm 15 years old. I'm freaked out. AND I really didn't know there was more than one theology, or that there was a difference between Lutherans and Baptists, Mormons and Catholics. I was not thinking at that level. So, here I am peaking out of the corner of my eye, cheating off of my friends answers, trying to figure out whether or not the fact that I had just been confirmed (affirmed my baptism) at my church counted or not. Just to be sure, I raised my hand. Couldn't hurt I figured. Plus, a girl I liked was doing it, too. So, there's that.

"If you skidded off of the road on your way home tonight, where would you go?" For what it is worth, some weeks ago I shared that part of our job as the church is to keep people safe. One way we do that is by keeping the

spiritually safe—and that question is spiritual abuse. But really, what I want to talk about today is why that question is used at all. It is meant to get you thinking about death in a fearful way so that you'll make a decision to follow Jesus.

If you don't know now, we are not that church. One of our unspoken theological maxims of theology is that, "if it freaks you out, then it's probably crap." What my coach didn't remember that night was that just two chapters before Paul says, "The law of the spirit of life in Christ has set you free from the law of sin and of death." That is to say that our lives of faith are not to be predicated or flow from a fear of death, but the abundant life given to all by God. Faith isn't about fearing death and acting accordingly. It is about embracing life and time from God's perspective. Our past, our present, and our future.

The one thing that my coach from high school had right was that all of us are going to die someday. The mortality rate is still 100% and if you're looking for job security, then being an undertaker is probably as good a bet as any. But death isn't the lens through which we enter discipleship...Life is. This is something that the Apostle Paul knew so well. When we catch up with him in our reading for today he is in prison with one of his disciples, Timothy, and he's writing to the church he planted in Philippi. The opening part of his letter isn't some kind of theological treatise like he gives us in Romans. Instead, it's the reflections of a life-long pastor to a community he loves, so more like a journal. And in his reflections, he gives us some hints as to how we ought to approach our lives today. Let's take a look.

Philippians 1:12-14; 20-30

¹²Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel. ¹³As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. ¹⁴And because of my chains, most of the brothers and sisters have become confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear.

I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. ²¹For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. ²²If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! ²³I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; ²⁴but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. ²⁵Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, ²⁶so that through my being with you again your boasting in Christ Jesus will abound on account of me.

²⁷Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in the one Spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the gospel ²⁸without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you. This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved—and that by God. ²⁹For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him, ³⁰since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have. So what is the first thing that Paul teaches us about how to approach our lives of discipleship through a lens of life and not death?

We will make peace with the past

I love what he says in verse 12, “and I want you to know, my dear friends that everything that has happened here has helped to spread the Good News.” Did I mention that Paul is in prison? And I don’t suppose that it is Club Fed, either. Now, we only get a drop in the ocean of his inner monologue, but we can imagine that during his time in prison he has to be wondering about the road that brought him there, right? If you have anything in prison, it is time to think about your choices.

Whenever I think back to The Pitch, remember the what happens if you die on your way home pitch, I heard when I was a kid and the countless iterations of it I’ve heard over the years, a central part of the picture is a fear of your past. How many of you when you were little heard the one about getting to heaven and God pulling out the filing cabinet of all the bad things you’ve done in your life? The idea being that what happens if God opens that up? You can’t change your past, so what now? Yikes. I may feel this more acutely than most, but I often wonder if I’m good enough in God’s eyes to do what I do. To be a pastor. You may not know, but I think a lot of people that do this work struggle with imposter syndrome. “what if they find out I’m not who they think I am?” “what if they find out that I’ve done most of the things I tell them not to do?” “what if they find out that they know more things than I’m supposed to know?” “what if they find out that I’m super lucky that social media didn’t exist when I was in college?” More importantly, what if God finds out?

Paul wasn’t a saint. Actually, based on what we know about his past, he is absolutely the kind of guy we would lock up and throw away the key. But, that isn’t his perspective, is it? When he looks at his situation and the road that brought him to it, what he sees isn’t the accumulation of debt on a scale he could never tip on his own, but the culmination of steps on a journey that God has been leading him on to a fuller version of himself. As a result, he has made peace with his past. Peace in the

Bible isn’t to whitewash it or to excuse it, but to let it be what it is. It is to integrate it into the whole. It is to do what God does with creation, taking chaos into order and making something very good.

We will trust in the future

Later in the text Paul says some things that I think are evidence of him sharing in the mind of God—That is to say, having deep Wisdom. He reflects on life and death. Read again what he says in verses 20-25. Does this sound like a person scared of the future? Absolutely not. He trusts the future because he trusts in Christ and how profound that he does? He isn’t going to go out on a morphine drip, he’s anticipating much worse than that, but here he is hemming and hawing about either way. There has been so much ink spilled about what death is like and unfortunately, I think that the church has done a wonderfully ironic job of encouraging us to be wildly at peace while also being properly terrified.

A few weeks back my son celebrated his tenth birthday with a dozen of his buddies. Surprising no one, he wanted to celebrate with swimming. He is half fish. Well, as little boys are want to do, the swimming evolved from complaining about how cold the water was, to a water gun fight, to chicken, to the inevitable belly flop contest. So, the gaggle of them got in a line behind the diving board and started doing what they do. The first kids went in, no problem. Then we got to one of his buddies who I could tell was nervous, so just before he went, he jumped out of line to go get his goggles. Can’t jump without goggles. ::nervous laugh:: some other kids went, then it was his turn again, he jumped out of line and grabbed water wings. You know, just in case. Then it was his turn a third time and thanks be to God, the boys found the water guns because he wasn’t going to go.

Now, I tell you that to tell you this, I think Paul understands death not like jumping into the inky blackness of nothing. I think what the text tells us is that he expects it to be like jumping into the cool embrace of the water of life with all those that have gone before and will come after us. And, I think that rather than Jesus being the one that shoves us into the water, Jesus is more the diving board ushering us through with some joy, and air, to spare.

Though, I think we, like my sons’ friend often approach it like the first picture and worse. Not only is there inky blackness, but there is also judgment to deal with so we try to shove enough religion into our days to make up for our past. We try to out serve Mother Theresa so that we look like one of the good guys when the time comes. And often we just avoid the idea of death all-together. Well, the Good News that Paul is talking about here is that Jesus has made a way for us through death, into life. Hebrews talks about Jesus being the “pioneer” of our

faith, “making a way” for us. Jesus has met and defeated death and has extended a hand back to us in our present moment so that we would hold it and trust it as we move forward—not inch by inch, but in one big leap into something new.

We will be citizens of the present

The final way that Paul encourages us to approach our lives is to be citizens of our present. I like how he puts it in the text when he tells us to be “citizens of heaven.” Which is to say that being a citizen of heaven means participating in it. And if we are taking Jesus at his word, then the Kingdom of Heaven is here, now. So, seize the carp! Carpe diem?

One of the things I do when I go to people’s houses is that I scope out bookshelves. Yep, I’m that guy. It isn’t because I’m being judgy, I’m just socially awkward and I’m trying to figure out what to talk about—and books give me that. Well, if you were to come to my house and do the same thing, then you might lead a conversation with me by suggesting a good therapist. You’d see books on making sense of childhood trauma, how to organize your house in 365 days, designing your work life, how to avoid Alzheimer’s, how to die well.

Like a lot of you, I’m in one of those highly leveraged portions of life. I am finally making sense of what was going on in my family system when I was ten, while also realizing that I have a son who is ten, while also realizing my parents have ten to 25 years left. I’m finally getting good at my work, while needing to decide what to do with my work, while also making sure I have enough for retirement so that I can stop working one day. I feel like I am everywhere and nowhere all at once.

When we are unable to make peace with our past or trust in our future, we vacate our present. We stop participating. And it isn’t exclusively our culture’s fault, it is highly influenced by how we imagine our relationship to God and vice versa. What we learn from Paul, though is what we gained from Jesus, and that is that right now and right here is where our lives are happening. “behold for the kingdom of God is at hand!” “Certainly you are with me in paradise.” What if we embraced our present in that way? What if we as individuals could be fully present with our loved ones and the big issues of our world—right now. What if we as a church could also fully participate in the world at this current moment? Well, then I think we might start to see what Paul talks about, a church that shines brightly for Christ. A lamp worth putting on a stand, or a church on a hill that shows people a vision for discipleship that isn’t about fear but about faith in Jesus.

In my time in family ministry here at Prince of Peace, I’ve had way more conversations than I care to number with students who are recovering from “The Pitch.” That is,

they are unsure and fearful about their relationship to God. And truth be told, we have numerous conversations as a staff and as a denomination about how to communicate in a way that is as effective as scaring people into heaven.

I know that it isn’t as quick. I know we won’t be able to sing a few songs, and raise hands on our way to chicken wings like I did some 23 years ago, but we can let our life speak. In the way that we make peace with our past. In the way we trust in our future, and in the way we are citizens of our present. We can demonstrate the truth of what we know by being the life filled, life-animated church of Christ right here and right now.