

I'd Rather Die  
Philippians 1:12-30, Acts 4:23-31  
The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights  
April 20, 2008  
Pastor Dave Carver

I'd rather die peacefully in my sleep like my grandfather than screaming in terror like his passengers.

Think about it for a minute. It'll come to you.

"I'd rather die..." Think about that phrase for a moment, if you will. We toss it around all the time. Have you ever used it? "Hey, Mary Ann, are you going to the prom with Dave?" "Please, I'd rather die!"

"So, Phil, are you going to vote for the candidate promising change in the upcoming election?" "Come on, you know I'd rather die than let that person take office..."

Really? Doing the electric slide with Dave is worse than death? Voting for that person would make life so bad, you'd rather end it?

Of course not, Dave. It's a figure of speech, that's all.

Oh, sometimes, we seriously consider the situations in which we'd rather die. Maybe you've thought about various medical treatments: if they had to resuscitate you, for instance, or if you had to have a feeding tube, would you take it? Or would you rather die? Often, this kind of discussion occurs late at night and there's beer involved, but you may have been a part of discussions where someone asked you, "So, if the aliens were coming for you at your house, and you had only a moment to react, and you knew that everyone on your street had already been eaten, would you allow them to capture you, or would you fight back?"

What would you die to avoid? What would you die for? That's the question raised by our reading in Philippians this morning. But before we get there, I want to look at the book of Acts. That gives us the background.

The believers, led by the Apostles, are getting all kinds of pressure in Jerusalem. Peter and John are arrested on a Matthew 28:7 charge: preaching the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. They're held in a cooling cell for a day or two, and then after a brief trial, they're let off with a stern warning. They hustle back to the faith community, who gathers to pray. You heard that prayer.

It was NOT a prayer of thanksgiving for the safe release of their beloved leaders.

It was NOT a prayer for protection, asking God to keep Peter, John, or anyone else out of harm's way in the future.

It was NOT a prayer asking God to smite the enemies of Jesus.

Instead, it IS a prayer for boldness on the part of God's people who are waiting for God to act through them! I want you to get that, before we look at Philippians, that the church, when faced with a threat, prays for boldness!

In our reading from Paul's letter to the Philippians, then, the chickens come home to roost (never having owned chickens, I don't really know what that means, but I like using it in a sentence). As we mentioned last week, the Apostle Paul, founder of the church in Philippi, finds himself in a jail cell in Rome on a Matthew 28:7 (preaching the resurrection of Jesus) charge. And this little book in the New Testament is a letter that he writes from prison to his friends – friends who, as we said last week, are probably pretty worried about Paul and about the future of their own church. And in the opening of the letter, Paul has said, "Don't worry, folks, God started this, God will finish it. Just do your part and work with what you've got." Listen, now, to God's word in the rest of Philippians chapter 1. I'd invite you to follow along on page 185 in your pew Bibles.

*I want you to know, brethren, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ; and most of the brethren have been made confident in the Lord because of my imprisonment, and are much more bold to speak the word of God without fear.*

Okay, so we start off with the whole idea of boldness. The first thing Paul has to say about his jail time is that it is working! The church is becoming more and more bold in terms of speaking out about Jesus. In fact, he continues, *Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel; the former proclaim Christ out of partisanship, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment. What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed; and in that I rejoice.*

It is so great, he says, because even people who were not preaching before are preaching now! Sure, they've got some mixed motives, but what do I care? I'm just glad that the news about Jesus is hitting the streets! In fact, he goes on to say, the most important thing that you can do is to speak truly and to live rightly in Jesus, no matter what the consequences. Verses 19-26:

*Yes, and I shall rejoice. For I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance, as it is my eager expectation and hope that I shall not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage {the word your bibles translates as "courage" is the Greek **parrisias** – the exact same word as we have in Acts 4:29 – **boldness!**} now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If it is to be life in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and*

*be with Christ, for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account. Convinced of this, I know that I shall remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith, so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus, because of my coming to you again.*

You have it there...is Paul afraid of death? NO! What is he afraid of? Letting Jesus down. Falling short in his effort to live and speak faithfully. In some way, he says, "I'd rather die..." I'd rather have complete union with Christ. But instead, I will stick around because God is not finished with me yet.

Now, if you're paying attention to Paul's letter, all that we've read so far is about him and his faith. He mentions things that have happened TO him (verse 12), IN him (verse 20), and THROUGH him (verse 25). But he hasn't asked the Philippians to do anything yet. He hasn't told them what God expects from them in the circumstances of their day. It's time for an imperative: what does this mean to the believers in Philippi?

*Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you stand firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, and not frightened in anything by your opponents. This is a clear omen to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God. For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake, engaged in the same conflict which you saw and now hear to be mine.*

Did you catch that? Paul is praying for *boldness* for the believers in Philippi! Paul's deep hope and expectation for his friends in Philippi – the church that he started – the people that he is expecting to follow him in the faith – is that they would stand firmly together, not flinching in the face of challenges. He tells them to go ahead and live the faith, even if it means suffering (which is probably will, because, after all, look at me, stuck here in jail...).

This is where the rubber meets the road, my friends. What are our hopes for those who follow us?

Think about that – and don't give me too quick of an answer. We are investing a boatload of time and energy and money into this building over the next three years. New windows and handicapped bathrooms and energy efficiency...why? Why are we doing that?

Ummmm, the people on the SHINE campaign said it was so this physical structure would be "a suitable platform of ministry for the next fifty years". Yeah, that sounds nice. But what does that mean? We want this building to be a platform for ministry. What do we hope happens inside of this place? What do we want for the next generation of believers in Jesus Christ in Crafton Heights?

Do we want our kids to grow up to be nice, popular, athletic, and rich? Do we hope that they'll get a job down at the plant and drive a nice car? That they will live a nice, quiet, comfortable life? That's a beautiful thing!

But in itself, that's not a life. I'm not convinced that that stuff is worth living for, and I'm positive that it's not worth dying for.

This is what Paul is trying to get to his friends in Philippi. I was there a couple of weeks ago. It's pretty easy to stand in the ancient marketplace and see the impressive marble buildings, and the stadium, and the ancient roadway connecting Philippi to Rome in the west and Persia in the east, and to think about those Philippian parents and their hopes for their kids. These are parents who have grown up in the glory of Rome and surrounded by the power of the Empire...and maybe what they want for their kids is a little piece of the pie. Maybe their hopes are for the next generation of the church in Philippi to be nice, popular, athletic, and rich...that they'll get a job down at the agora and drive a nice chariot. That they'll have nice, quiet, comfortable lives...

Those are hopes that are understandable. Maybe even commendable. But they are not hopes that I share.

My hope for the next generation of people who come to faith in this building is that they will fall so in love with Jesus that they will be bold in the face of anything that would distract them from serving him. My hope is that we will raise up a generation of Christian leaders who will learn to speak with boldness and confidence and who are willing to live lives that reflect the power and authority of God the Father, the willing and humble service of God the Son, and be sustained by the love and presence of God the Spirit.

Look, I've got nothing against a nice car and a good job. But there is no salvation in those things. There is nothing in those things that is enough to fuel a passion for living the life for which God has created us.

My hope, my prayer is that we will give rise to a band of disciples who will stand firmly together, to speak the truth, and to live the love of Christ, even if it costs them...even if it costs us.

My hope, my prayer, is that people will come to this building and meet a community of faith who are willing to tell them of a God whose love and holiness and power are worth everything. I hope that the people who fill this building in the next fifty years will know the power of a "love so amazing, so divine" that it "demands my life, my soul, my all". That's not just a nice hymn...that's a statement of faith in a God who is worthy of that kind of commitment!

President Abraham Lincoln made a habit of dropping by the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington DC for their Wednesday night services. As he was nervous that his presence would disrupt the worship of others, he would sit in Pastor Gurley's study and listen for the message. Once as he and his assistant John Hay walked back to the White House, Hay asked

him what he thought of the evening's message. Lincoln replied, "Well, it is obvious that he put a great deal of thought and work into the message. The content was excellent."

Hay said, "So you thought it was a good sermon."

"No," the President answered. "I thought the content was excellent. But Dr. Gurley forgot one important matter. The preacher forgot to ask us to do something great."

That, my friends, is why we want to have a building here for the next fifty years. That is why Paul sat in his prison cell and wrote the Philippian Christians. The reason that they went to church, and the reason that we come to worship, is the same: to come into a relationship with the savior who is so compelling that, next to him, nothing else matters. Nothing else even compares.

A relationship like that, a faith like that...well, Paul thought it was worth dying for.

In their profound book *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony*, Stanley Hauerwas and Will Willimon tell the story of a Princeton student who was being interviewed by a reporter about the possibilities of American military action overseas. Her incredibly sad response was, "There's nothing worth dying for." Which means, unfortunately, that at some point that poor woman will have the unpleasant task of dying for nothing.<sup>1</sup>

Do we want those who join us and follow us in this building to die for nothing? Or to live for something? Do we hope that they will live lives of quiet calm and anonymity, or that they will respond to the call of Christ in ways that shape the culture and the world for generations to come?

Let us, beloved, challenge the world with a faith that lives out the radical, inclusive love of Jesus Christ...Love that begins with a great reformation in our own lives...love that calls for a great participation from us...love that hopes for a great transformation in our streets and in the world...love that points to a great salvation for all of God's children.

We could do less, but I'd rather die. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Abingdon Paperback ©1989 p. 150.