

Pentecost 19, Proper 23. October 15, 2017. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods, Freeland WA
Nigel Taber-Hamilton Isaiah 25:1-9 Psalm 23 Philippians 4:1-9 Matthew 22:1-14

We have some really remarkable readings today -- especially the passages from Philippians and Matthew -- though the most helpful order is by reversing those two: Matthew, then Philippians. Last week I said, of Jesus' parables, that if you're not shocked, you're not paying attention. The problem with this parable in Matthew is that it isn't a parable! Or, at least, it's no longer a parable. Matthew has taken the story so far from what Jesus almost certainly said as reported by Luke that the challenge isn't to figure out *why* you should be shocked, but *where*! Partly this is because Matthew took one literary device -- a parable -- and turned it into another -- an allegory -- which doesn't function in the same way as a parable. In this allegory the King (= God), who's preparing a feast for his son (=Jesus) and invites his subjects (=Israel) to the meal. When they won't come he destroys their city (=Jerusalem - which means the allegory has to be post 70 A.D. when the Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans) and invites others (=foreigners) to the feast! The shocking parts are, by turns, where the "King's" actions and personality were nasty, brutish, murderous, oppressive, and selfish, showing how he had an explosive and vindictive temper. That's not a description of any God I know! It is, however a description of Herod the Great, which suggests Matthew had another axe to grind! And Matthew's readers would hardly have found Matthew's description shocking -- everyone know what a nasty piece of work Herod was! What's lost from the original version in Luke (14:15-24) is the part that Jesus' listeners would have been shocked by: that at the dinner party Jesus described, the ones who joyfully accepted the invitation to the banquet were those least likely to have been invited in regular society: "the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame" -- everyone, in other words, who wasn't a part of the dominant culture! So to that list we should add women.

And that's the transition point to the piece from Paul's letter to the Philippian community: the make-up of the guests invited to the divine banquet. The Philippi of Paul's letter was founded as a Roman community by retired soldiers from the 28th Legion who had helped the imperial forces of Octavian and Mark Anthony defeat Brutus, Cassius, and the forces of the old Republic. When Octavian became Caesar Augustus, he allowed his special-forces soldiers from his elite Imperial bodyguard -- the Praetorian Guard -- to settle there too. And Philippi was, like every city where Paul founded a Christian community, a center for imperial administration. In other words, Philippi was an institutional town, it was an imperial town, it was a military town -- the very epitome of Roman Empire military power: regimented, hierarchical, patriotic -- you'd never catch anyone in Philippi kneeling for the Roman Imperial anthem!! So what would Philippi be today? Places like Everett, Poulsbo-Silverdale, Bremerton, and Lakewood! And especially like Oak Harbor,

That makes the attitude of this newly-formed Christian Community all the more remarkable, considering that it was Paul that founded it. The authentic Paul, you'll remember was radically inclusive -- "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus (Gal 3:28). And the authentic Paul was radically non-hierarchical - the body is different only in function, he told the Corinthian community, not in value before God or between each other. Neither of those characteristics were centrally evident in the Roman armies! Or maybe any army, or navy, or air force....!

None of the characteristics you might think would show up in a retired military community are in any way evident in the Philippian Christians' relationship with Paul. Instead, what we see in Paul's Philippian community is how very much they were attached to him – how much they loved him – and how very fond he was of them – how much he loved them. They understood him, and they were grateful for all he had done for them. Of all the Pauline churches, their contributions (which Paul gratefully acknowledges) appear to be the only ones he accepted. There's a level of trust and relationship here that appears nowhere else in Paul's writings.

About the contents of the letter, it seems clear Paul viewed this as his farewell letter – not just to the Philippians, but to any other community who might get a copy. He was, after all in prison – and not just any prison, an imperial prison – in Ephesus. The possibility that he would be executed was very real, as he acknowledged at the beginning of the letter – and – like all of us – you might expect that the possibility of impending death would have a sobering effect on him.

That reality makes the content of this letter all the more remarkable. Without question, this letter is the happiest, the most joyful, of all the letters Paul wrote that we still have; it's full of thanksgiving.

Today's passage underscores both the identity Paul almost absent-mindedly proclaimed, and the depth of his thankfulness. First, he mentioned two women – Eudoria and Syntyche – who were having a disagreement. In urging the Philippians to encourage them to settle their differences he reminded the whole community that – along with Clement – these two women were co-workers, fellow evangelists – not inferior in any way, in other words – who “struggled beside me in the work of the gospel.”

And then, in one of his greatest exhortations, he said this: ***“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”***

Rejoice! Be gentle! Don't worry! Pray with thanksgiving! That's a recipe for living, as people of faith. That's particularly a recipe for living given the way things are today in our world – where there's an open invitation to worry, to be closed-off, aggressively protecting what we fear might be taken from us.

Instead, Paul continued, the way to respond is to embrace truth, honor, justice, committed and generous action for good and you will find God's peace. That, too, is part of a Godly recipe for goodness.

Isn't God's peace something we all crave? Here's a way into that peace: follow Paul's recipe, his prescription for the healing of the world and all in it; the prescription for our healing.

Good words! There's one last thing here, though, that I think it's easy to miss: Paul was writing to the Philippians as a community, not as individuals. There's an unspoken imperative here: in all

that you do, make sure you do it as a part of a community of faith! Concerted action by committed communities change things for the good! Conversely, actions by individuals severed from communities are much less likely to be successful. We can be a place, a community like the one Paul wrote to, nearly 2,000 years ago – to do so will require the commitment and support of all of us. Are you in, for that?