

Philippians 1: 27 – 2: 5

²⁷ Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, ²⁸ and are in no way intimidated by your opponents. For them this is evidence of their destruction, but of your salvation. And this is God's doing. ²⁹ For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well— ³⁰ since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.

2 If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, ² make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ³ Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. ⁴ Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. ⁵ Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus...

El Buen Pastor (hosting Trinity Presbyterian Church)

October 1, 2017

World Communion Sunday

“Make My Joy Complete?”

St. Paul pens a note from his jail cell. He is suffering. He doesn't know what tomorrow will look like. He is writing to a little church in Philippi. They too are suffering. And the church doesn't know what tomorrow will bring. And here we are as well. In a dark time when there is much suffering. And the future is unknown. St. Paul's letter seems fresh to our ears today.

Inside his words we listen to a painful truth: that if we follow the way of the gospel long enough, then we will encounter some sort of suffering. We do not have to go looking for suffering. We will not put up with oppression or injustice or abuse, for the sake of suffering. But if we are going to live in this world as gospel people, who practice loving like Jesus does, then suffering will eventually find us. I don't know why it is true, but it is. And if we don't believe it, St. Paul says, just look to the cross.

How do we make sense of it? Why do love and suffering exist side-by-side? When we fall in love with our “sweetie pie” we become vulnerable to the suffering of one day having to lose them. If we have children, we open ourselves up to great joy; as well as to great disappointment and heartache. When we grieve isn't it because we have loved? I have a friend who had finally gotten pregnant with her first child. Five months into the pregnancy they found a rare genetic disorder in the baby. The doctors told her and her husband, that if the baby were to survive being birthed, the child might only live a few minutes outside of the womb. They decided to carry the baby full term with the hopes of getting to meet the baby, even if for only a short time. Sadly, the baby did not survive being born. Still, the nurse swaddled the baby girl in a pink blanket and placed her in her mother's arms. They named her Sophia Grace. As my friend held her lifeless baby, she said she had never felt so much love, and she had never felt so much suffering. Why is it true? Why does the cross say it is so? Great love inside the womb of great suffering...

But then, we hear St. Paul's tone change. Hope slips in through the back door. "If there is any encouragement, any consolation in love, any compassion or sympathy, make my joy complete." Do not be intimidated by your opponents. Do not believe them when they claim that you are an issue to be discarded. That will be evidence of their own destruction. Instead, stand firm, walking side-by-side in one mind for the faith of the gospel. A few summers ago when the Charleston nine were killed in their church, with great gospel power the grieving community stood firm and said, "We will not be intimidated by fear, but instead we choose love."

Last Thursday a group marched side-by-side for **Minerva Garcia** and **Juana Tobar Ortega** and **José Chicas**, in solidarity to protest our government's cruel deportation agenda. They walked proclaiming, "we will not be intimidated by fear, but instead we choose love." Today, as we meet with you, beloved El Buen Pastor, we worship in two languages, but we are of one voice. Today, we are a church of two cultures, but we will walk side-by-side to one table. We have different backgrounds, but we share in one faith, one gospel, united in the one mind of Jesus Christ.

Today we stand with each other in our joy and our suffering. Because love will not be intimidated by fear. And love will not allow those who are suffering to suffer alone. Amen.