

Text: Philippians 1:3-11

### I. N. I.

There is a fundamentalist LDS leader being held in an Arizona jail, Warren Jeffs. His sect practices polygamy. The raid on the group’s “ranch” was greatly publicized and went forth on the suspicion of child abuse. This summer a raid all across NJ turned up not only crooks with political ties, but a rabbi who sold body parts! Some people belong in prison: some do not.

When we visited Dachau in 1997, I paused at cell block 9; that’s where Christian clergy were housed. The Third Reich interned many Christian leaders in work camps. In the Soviet Union religious and the faithful alike were incarcerated, tortured and killed. The persecution and arrest of innocent Christian and non-Christian religious is not new. It’s been estimated that more people were martyred for their faith 20th/ 21st century than at any time previous! News? No.

St. John’s REVELATION was written by the Apostle exiled to a penal colony called Patmos “*on account of the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus.*” Paul wrote Philippians from prison, most likely Rome. It might be embarrassing for some to write from jail. It’s not easy receiving such correspondence; envelopes mailed from jail come stamped on the outside, *sent from prison*. But Paul is not ashamed. “*My imprisonment is for Christ,*” he says (1:12 ff.) “*and [because it has become so well known] it has [actually] served to advance the gospel.*”

What would you expect your leader to write to you from behind bars?

- Get me out of here.
- I didn’t do it; I’m innocent.
- It was all a big misunderstanding.”

It could be quite embarrassing for all the parties involved.

Well don’t worry, your pastor is not on his way to the big house. But embarrassing for me are the *gushy* sentiments Paul expresses toward the Philippians: “*how [he] yearns for [them] all with the affection of Christ Jesus.*” It just pours out in this letter. The thing is Paul is not ashamed of his love for them. It is nothing more than the love of God and his Son Jesus Christ.

His imprisonment has brought new strength and boldness to the work, helping

some to preach the Gospel with new vigor. Others, Paul's detractors and the opponents of *free grace*, took advantage of the situation to preach a Gospel polluted with self righteousness and laced with the Law. Ever the optimist, Paul concludes that motives don't matter. What matters is that the name of Jesus Christ is lifted up and proclaimed everywhere. The Good News is always powerful and the Holy Spirit is ever at work in it converting sinners and bringing people to faith by its proclamation.

But what would you do if your mentor was in jail? Some would turn their backs and run; cutting off all ties. I'm sure some did. But the Philippians remained at his side, visiting him and sending aide. Paul would be quick to remind us that our Lord himself was arrested. The story of the cross is our story. It's our identity, the cross marks our lives and punctuates our speech. The cross means salvation to us!

We need to take a lesson from Paul. The shame of a prison and their separation from each other is part of his cross. Yet it is not enough to dampen his spirits. He teaches us to thrive in all life's situations; in good and in difficult circumstances. Praise and thanksgiving are always in his heart and on his lips. He thanks God every time he remembers his supporters in Philippi.

We do well to study his cheerful spirit. He rejoices in their partnership/ fellowship. They are good, decent, humble, faithful—and above all generous. At the end of this letter (4:15) Paul commends them and wants them to know that he has not forgotten their kindness. While he was working in Thessalonica it was the people of Philippi who supported him with their prayers and encouragements, and they helped him materially and with money.

Paul has done what he could. He has endured. He proclaimed the Gospel of free grace. He bore witness to Jesus Christ, teaching all that God's promises find their fulfillment in him. And now he struggles with his own mortality.

But in the midst of his own uncertainties Paul is concerned about them. Paul reminds the Philippians that they are in every way his partners in the Gospel, from "*the [very] first day until now.*" He is proud of them and grateful for their support. And the work will go on, for the Spirit is ever at work through the Gospel saving sinners. The same Lord will continue his work in them, *bringing their faith to completion.*

What is said of the Philippians might be said of you too. In fact it ought to be. Each one of you has a stake in the ministry of Prince of Peace. This is our cross.

We too much think of ourselves, and when we do we think of ourselves as *a church*, the end result. Instead we need to consider ourselves in partnership on a mission. Our partnership is a ministry rooted in Christ. Our work is bringing his message to Sussex County.

That Bible verse I keep quoting you, the one from 1 Peter, about being *a people of God, a church, a royal priesthood...* It speaks about this ministry we have: we are to “*declare the deeds of him who called us out of darkness into light.*”

This ministry is God-given; it is *ours together*. We esteem too little the parts we have been given in leading the lost and lonely to saving faith in Jesus Christ. There is a reason I keep telling you to take LUTHERAN WITNESS home, the ABS Bible reading tracts, the Advent devotional literature. Pass it along! All of it is meant to help you in this partnership; help you do your part.

You are working at it when you to give to the food pantry, to donate your gently used jackets and sweaters to the needy. You reach out to others with the love of Jesus when you shop for the needy at the holidays or contribute to Today’s Choice. You have a part to play in praying for the sick and those who have needs and issues.

We are in a partnership sharing the love of God with all people, especially those families who are involved in our preschool. It is an important partnership, it is a ministry, a ministry that bears the name Prince of Peace.

May we never be embarrassed by Him, or his name. Amen

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