

## **An Epidemic of Good News #6**

**Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ, I'm Pastor Curtis Aguirre of Our Redeemer Lutheran Church in Penticton, British Columbia, and this is the sixth instalment of, "An Epidemic of Good News," a devotional Bible study on Paul's letter to the Philippians.**

**Let's begin with a prayer.**

**Draw your church together, O God, into one great company of disciples, together following our teacher Jesus Christ into every walk of life, together serving in Christ's mission in the world, and together witnessing to your love wherever you will send us; for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (From Evangelical Lutheran Worship: Occasional Services for the Assembly, p.392)**

**So far we have determined that Paul is writing this letter to the congregation in the city of Philippi, in the northern part of Greece, because they have sent him a care package. This is a thank you letter. The care package is because Paul is being held prisoner, awaiting trial, probably in the city of Rome. Of all the congregations that Paul has had dealings with, the congregation in Philippi has been consistently generous and supportive of him, his ministry, and his appeals to help the persecuted believers in Jerusalem.**

**But what is also clear is that the Philippians have been generous and supportive despite the fact that they themselves are under persecution. As Paul says in Philippians 1:30, "...since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have."**

**Remember, the first time Paul was in Philippi, when he first preached to and then baptized Lydia, the gaoler, and their entire households, thus founding the congregation, he and his companions Silas and Timothy were beaten and imprisoned by an angry mob. Now again, Paul is in prison. And, based on his phrase, "since you are having the same struggle," it sounds like this sort of thing is happening to the Christians in Philippi too.**

**So Paul and the Philippians are soul mates, so to speak, sharing the same struggles and paying the same price for their convictions.**

**But Paul is not prepared to let this letter just be a, "yeah, life is hard, I know how you feel, look at me," commiseration letter. The Philippians, by their hardships and suffering, as well as by their faithful generosity, have proved themselves ready to move to the next level of learning. They are ready for spiritual meat.**

**What do I mean by spiritual meat? In I Corinthians 3:1-3, Paul tells the congregation in Corinth this:**

**And so, brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready, for you are still of the**

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**flesh. For as long as there is jealousy and quarrelling among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving according to human inclinations? (I Corinthians 3:1-3)**

**The congregation in Corinth was very different from the congregation in Philippi. Based on the letters that Paul wrote to Corinth, the congregation there had all kinds of problems with infighting, factionalism, big egos, and a basic misunderstanding of what it was that they were called to be in Christ. Some of this may have had to do with the fact that it sounds like life was pretty easy for them. They could be Christians without having to pay much of a price.**

**The Philippians, by contrast, seem to have paid a price from the beginning. And maybe it was not in spite of their hardships that they were so faithful and generous, but because of those hardships. While the Corinthians still had a lot to learn about letting go of their pet projects and their fragile egos and all that, the Philippians learned those lessons from early on.**

**And so, Paul is ready to induct them deeper into the heart of life in Christ. Paul says in Philippians 1:29, “For God has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ but suffering for him as well.”**

**Yes, according to Paul, to suffer for your faith is actually a gift. Now why would he say that? Well, let’s look at the first half of Philippians chapter 2, where Paul inducts the Philippians into the solid spiritual food; the spiritual meat of life in Christ.**

**Chapter 2 begins with these words:**

**If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility, regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.  
(Philippians 2:1-4)**

**Here are the key words or concepts in this passage: Christ, love, Spirit, compassion, sympathy, same mind, same love, full accord, one mind, humility. To use the language of a late medieval mystical work that influenced Martin Luther, namely, the *Theologia Germanica*, Paul is talking about setting aside the “I” in order to serve the “you” and the “we”.**

**Here we come into the deeper insights of the spiritual path, some of which I touched on in the last video. When I enter deeply into the “life of the Spirit” I do not believe in order to be saved from hell or to get favours from God or to be spared hardship. As I said in the last video, this is about falling in love with God. When I am in love, I am ready to show my love, through thick and thin. I do not love so that; I love just because.**

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**The one mind that Paul is talking about here is not a mindless agreeing on points of argument or doctrine or opinion. The same mind is a shared way of being, namely, the way of being that is the Way of Christ, the Way of God. And so, in the next verses he lays out this profoundest of spiritual paths in one of the most beautiful passages in the Bible:**

**Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, he did not consider equality with God as something to be taken advantage of, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.**

**Therefore God highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:5-11)**

**This is sometimes called the Great Kenotic hymn, from the Greek word, “kenosis”, which means self-emptying. The deepest mystery of God is that God emptied God’s self in Christ; that Christ emptied himself in Jesus, that Jesus emptied himself on the cross. As the saying goes, no resurrection without crucifixion. The exaltation of Christ comes, not as a reward for a job well done. If we think that way, we have missed the whole point. The resurrection comes because the new way of being revealed in Christ leads to life. It is the undoing of the death that is human culture.**

**Now we have to be careful here not to misapply this profound spiritual teaching. Someone stuck in an abusive relationship, or someone living in an oppressive dictatorship might be excused for feeling like this is saying that you should just be a doormat and take whatever your oppressor dishes out. I will come back to that topic in a later video when I connect Paul’s teaching here to Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon on the Mount and other places.**

**Here, we need to be clear about the specific area of life that Paul is addressing, namely, life in community. He is not writing to the city officials in Philippi to tell them how to run their city. He is not writing to people to tell them how to conduct their home lives. He is writing to a congregation to tell them how to be together as a community of faith.**

**And what he lays out here is what Jesus taught at the Last Supper when he washed his disciples’ feet. As disciples together, as followers of Jesus working together, we have to, above all, serve each other. And in order to do that we have to leave behind all our power plays, all our sense of entitlement, all our sense of territoriality, all our need for control, and even the need to be needed. All of those things ultimately play themselves out in negative ways, because all of those things are ego projects.**

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**We have to let go of all that and embrace one thing: so much love for God that we have nothing but love for each other. So much love for God that all we want to do is serve each other. Or, as Paul put it in Philippians 2:5, to have the same mind as Christ had, who gave up his status, and became humble and obedient to God. God brings down the mighty, but lifts up the lowly.**

**So Paul continues with these words:**

**Therefore, my beloved...work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you to both will and work for his good pleasure.  
(Philippians 2:12-13)**

**What does Paul mean by, “work out your own salvation”? So often we focus on salvation as meaning not going to hell. But what God is actually saving us from is saving ourselves. We are the ones who plague and torment each other with wars, oppression, abuse, exploitation, harassment, bullying, mean-spiritedness, dishonesty, deception, emotional manipulation, projecting our needs or insecurities onto others, blame, scapegoating, betrayal, and so many other vehicles of human cruelty. But God is at work in us (if we let God in to do that work) enabling us to will and work for God’s good pleasure.**

**And so Paul continues by saying:**

**Do all things without murmuring and arguing, so that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation in which you shine like stars in the world. (Philippians 2:14-15)**

**Yes, that’s right: shining stars in the world, you and me, when we live this way. Now here’s the thing about this image: stars shine against the background of the dark night sky. In this dark world, our job is to give what light we have to give. But when the Sun comes, our light does not compete with that light, but allows itself to be subsumed into the light of the Sun. I know that’s now how it works astronomically. But Paul is not being an astronomer here; he’s being a poet, creating a poetic image that communicates a spiritual message. We shine and look forward to the dawn when our light will be absorbed into Christ’s much brighter light.**

**And so, Paul concludes this section with these words:**

**It is by holding fast to the word of life that I can boast on the day of Christ that I did not run in vain or labour in vain. But even if I am being poured out as a libation over the sacrifice and the offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you; and in the same way you also must be glad and rejoice with me. (Philippians 2:16-17)**

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**For Paul, the happiest thing would be to know that his teaching was not in vain. His hope that the Christians in Philippi will embody life in Christ, or the life of the Spirit, makes his precarious situation tolerable—or even more than tolerable: grounds for rejoicing.**

**In the next instalment of An Epidemic of Good News, I want to skip ahead to Philippians 3 and explore a little the relationship between Paul's teaching and the person and teachings of Jesus. I'll pick up the verses I'm skipping over in a later video where I will look at the individuals that Paul names in this letter.**

**Let's close with the Lord's Prayer.**

**Our Father, who art in heaven,  
Hallowed be thy name.  
Thy kingdom come,  
Thy will be done,  
On earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread,  
And for give us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.  
And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.  
For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.**