

17th Sunday after Pentecost A 24 September 2023

Philippians 1:21-30

St Peter's Lutheran Church, Elizabeth

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Grace and peace to you from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. Let's pray: ...

"For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain." Today, we're invited into St Paul's conundrum and it betrays two underlying questions that we all ponder from time to time, I'm sure: "Why am I here?" and "What is my purpose?" But before we get into the nuts and bolts of it, I thought I'd share something playful from Dr. Seuss:

If you'd never been born, then what would you be?
You might be a fish or a toad in the tree.
You might be a doorknob or three baked potatoes.
Worse than all that, you might be a wasn't.
A wasn't just isn't. He just isn't present.
But you—you are you. Now isn't that pleasant?
Today you are you, and it's truer than true
That there's no one alive who is you-er than you.
Shout loud, "I am lucky to be what I am!
Thank goodness I'm not just a clam or a ham
Or a dusty old jar of gooseberry jam.
If I am what I am, and it's a great thing to be.
If I say so myself, happy birthday to me!" ^[1]

Why are you here, (names)? I hope you can all answer, "Because God created me to be me and not somebody else. God wants me here. God has a purpose for me and that is to be a child of God, to have fellowship with God, to be God's child here in this place, right now." We read in Genesis [1:26-28]:

"Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image,
according to our likeness . . .
So God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.
God blessed them."

You're a special creation of God; you're a blessing of God. You're more than a fish or a toad or a clam, you're the very image of God. Woman or man, young or old, happy or sad, you're here because God wants you to be here. You're here because God put you here for his purposes.

On the other hand, it's fair to question what God has in mind with us. Humanity is often far less salubrious than the lofty image bestowed on it by the Creator himself. Read the newspaper, turn on the TV. Human beings can be very unappealing as Martin Luther so eloquently states:

“What good comes of man?
He eats and drinks only the best bread,
wine, beer, precious spices too.
He excretes nothing but corruption,
snot, sputum, matter, sweat,
sores, pox, scruff, slough,
discharge, pus, dung and urine.
He clothes himself in satin and gold,
spreads lice, nits, fleas and other vermin.”

Yuck! That's gross, to use a popular term. But true nonetheless, especially when you bring everything down-to-earth as Luther so adeptly and unapologetically did. There's really not much to glamorise about human beings after all, is there? And no-one is exempt. So instead of people trying to distinguish themselves from others, we're best served by realising and accepting our common humanity. We're more alike as human beings than we're different. A familiar saying says:

“I looked at my brother through the telescope of criticism
and I said, ‘How coarse my brother is’.
I looked at my brother through the microscope of scorn
and I said, ‘How small my brother is’.
I looked into the mirror of truth
and I said, ‘How like me my brother is’.” [2]

Dietrich Bonhoeffer also pondered the question, “Who am I?” from the confines of a Nazi prison. He considered the difference between who others saw him to be and who he saw himself to be. To others he appeared calm, cheerful, firm, friendly, confident, commanding, and proud; to himself, restless, longing, sick, trembling, powerless, weary, and empty. Yet, through all his weariness and trials, his trembling faith confirmed:

“Whoever I am,
Thou knowest, O Lord,
I am Thine.” [3]

Even though we’re aware of our failings, we also hear God’s Word to us: “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people . . . Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy” (1 Peter 2:9,10). While we still were sinners, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly (Romans 5:6-8). We are at the same time, sinners and saints; people who fall short of God’s holiness and at the same time, a righteous people for God through Christ.

St. Paul in his letter to the Philippians describes how he processed his predicament.

“For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labour for me; and I do not know which I prefer. 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 for you” [1:21-24].

Paul wondered what his purpose was - why he was still on earth when he wanted to be with the Lord. His conclusion? - “to live is Christ, to die is gain.” He clearly recognised that he was here for a purpose, for fellowship with God in this life and for eternal life. You’re here for the same reason. You’re God’s child and God’s image. You’re here to bring others to a knowledge of the truth which is Jesus Christ and to glorify God in your life.

Christians are often the only Bible the world will ever read. You can be a bible for your friends and neighbours as they see your faith and life. Many are saddened by the death of Billy Graham and express concern that the great crusades and rallies of his ministry may not continue into the future. But God uses each person to reach people in their own, unique way, and evangelism today tends to be quieter, one-on-one, letting other people know you care about them and that God loves them. Saints, you are the prophets and sages and witnesses today. You are the disciples and apostles to this community at this time. You are the chosen people of God for your neighbourhood, school, shopping centre or doctor’s waiting room.

“Why am I here?” is a question I’m often asked by elderly, sick, and infirm people. A common refrain is: “Why do some people live on and on, while others are struck down in the prime of life.” Many of you will remember Myrtle Heidenreich. She had an answer to the “Why?” So long as she had life and breath, she could pray.

Myrtle wasn't intimidated by what others thought when she humbly asked people if they knew Jesus. Even when you've exhausted all other avenues of service in the church – be it teaching Sunday school, catering, welfare work, visiting, leading Bible studies or greeting and ushering, you can pray. We can pray and pray for the church and its pastors and people, for the sick and lonely, for those who are troubled and especially for children and young people. Even when the longing to go and be with the Lord becomes so great, know that as long as God gives you breath, you have a reason and a purpose for living.

God doesn't promise that following faithfully will be easy. Pastor Lhatru is a living testimony to intense suffering for the gospel. Being God's witness will inevitably invite this, but St Paul says this is God's doing too:

“For God has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well— since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have” (Philippians 1:29,30).

Saints, we are struggling human beings. We don't have all the answers. Why should we be any different from St Paul who acknowledged his own struggles? We're not called to know everything or be everything. It's enough to be who we are, the special child God created us to be. It's enough to believe and follow the Lord Jesus and to allow ourselves to be used to glorify God. Be glad you're not a fish or a toad or a clam or a ham but the person God made you to be. “Who am I?” I am God's child. “Why am I here?” To be just who I am, a living, breathing, walking gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ for the sake of those who don't yet know him. Remember, living as a child of God, is Christ, and dying is glorious gain. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds safe in Christ Jesus. Amen.

[1] (Excerpt from *Happy Birthday To You!* A poem by Theodor Seuss Geisel [Dr Seuss])

[2] (Attributed to: Thomas S. Monson – American pastor)

[3] (Excerpt from *Prison Poems* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer)
