

Philippians 3:17 - 4:1
Just Like Paul

A couple weeks ago, a good number of us gathered on the church grounds for a work day sponsored by our Property Ministry – it was a perfect morning for the outdoor tasks they had planned. We spread out to work throughout the area and I found myself spending a good portion of the morning working my way around the pine tree that sits on the south lawn preparing the space for mulching. It seemed like a good (read: easy) place to work because when I stooped over and pulled out a weed, the ground was loose and the weed – root and all – slid right out. I thought: “ahh – this will just take a few minutes.” It didn’t take long for me to realize that I’d better sit down and get comfortable because I was going to be there for awhile. The longer I worked, it seemed, the deeper and stronger the roots of the weeds became. I found myself digging deeper and deeper certain that if I just tried a little harder, twisted a little more, got a better grip, I could get that weed out of there once and for all. But as I tugged and tugged, I grudgingly realized that I was not going to win this battle – and though I might have staved off their appearance through the mulch for a few weeks or maybe a little longer - those weeds were there to stay.

At a point in my struggle with these stubborn roots, I began to think about the good theological lesson this simple garden task was offering; after all, that’s what we do when confronted with life’s problems! It was clear that though I didn’t want those weeds to thrive, if they could speak they may very well have cried out with conviction: “We belong here, we’re not leaving and we will grow and [thrive!](#)” That rootedness, that sense of belonging is indeed what we are called to develop and invited to receive when we encounter the transforming love of God in Jesus Christ. And it is that love which propels us to live beyond ourselves out of service and gratitude for what we have received, inviting others to experience the same. As I continued to pull and tug, I thought about me the ministry of the Apostle Paul and how it was indeed deeply rooted in this transforming love. His early days as a respected and renowned Pharisee, a persecutor of the church, gave way to a life of service to Jesus Christ when he encountered the Risen Lord on the road to Damascus.

Paul had a good relationship with the people who were part of the church at Philippi. They consistently supported his ministry, and though he wasn’t able to be with them as much as he and they would have liked, his respect and affection for them and they for him was deep. Deep enough, in fact, that when he hears and responds to the difficulties they’d been experiencing – he’s moved to tears.

We don’t know with all certainty what was happening that makes Paul refer to a certain part of the church as ‘enemies of the cross of Christ.’ There may have been a voice which still claimed salvation must be earned through a tenacious adherence to the laws of eating, cleanliness and ritual. On the other hand, those ‘enemies of the cross’ may have been claiming that ‘freedom in Christ’ meant the freedom to do anything and everything without thought to service, sacrifice or discipline. And, perhaps, more likely both voices were present, creating confusion and distraction from the ministry the church had been called to do.

What we do know with certainty is that Paul calls the church to ‘join in imitating’ him, taking their cues from Paul and others who were living lives of a deep rooted faith.

As a child, doing something that somebody else had already done, earned a person the unpopular title of ‘copycat.’ None of us wanted to have that label, and so we struggled to be ‘the first’ to do it, or at least claim the loudest that we were ‘the first.’ But as I grew older, discovering that ‘imitation is the highest form of flattery’ replaced my childhood understanding.

It does feel kind of nice when someone likes what we’ve done: wants a recipe for something we’ve made, or wants to pattern an event or project after something we’ve been part of planning. It seems to give value to that ‘thing’ and to our efforts. But as affirming as it is to have somebody else appreciate what we’ve done, how many of us would set ourselves apart by saying ‘do it just like me?’ And yet that is just what Paul does. From a prison cell in Rome, beaten and anticipating that death is near, he exhorts his beloved brothers and sisters – his companions in the faith – to do what he has done.

Through his letters and Luke’s writing in Acts, we have a wonderful picture of faithful living. Luke describes the awesome activity of Paul, and his companions in ministry; the extraordinary missionary journeys which spread the good news of Jesus Christ out from Jerusalem and into Asia Minor; the ongoing messages of the faith which were read and heard in these early days of the churches life, all paint a picture of Paul’s ministry. In his letters, we have words of encouragement, affirmations of spiritual gifts and instruction stemming out of real-life experiences in the early church that continue to give us direction in our day. We see powerful examples of how the church can and must carry out its mission in times of service, persecution and even disagreement.

Yet over and over again, Paul points away from himself or his accomplishments and toward the risen Christ: “let the one who boasts,” Paul says, “boast in the Lord.” Verses like this come to mind as we think about Paul, who is never shy about pointing out a good thing, but always quick to acknowledge the source as Jesus Christ. Most of us aren’t likely to turn away from success and prestige without an overwhelming sense of belonging somewhere else. Paul’s encounter with the Risen Christ on the road to Damascus transformed his life. His zealous and successful Pharisaic work was left behind when God reached out to him and brought him close. He no longer lived out of ritual to get close to God, but rather, he lived out of a deep sense of gratitude because he knew he did belong to God. From that point on, everything he did was a response to his new identity in Christ.

It’s that deep rootedness in Christ, that sense of belonging that comes out so strongly when we think about many of the challenges he experienced in his ministry. While his relationship with the Philippians was very strong, this wasn’t always true with other congregations. While the Good News continued to spread, its movement was also characterized by persecution, imprisonment and martyrdom. And it’s very clear that his

passion for the church often led to heartache, as congregations struggled to make sense out of their new faith.

In the midst of all those things, Paul's faith didn't wane; his conviction didn't lessen and most of all his sense of identity as 'God's own' only grew stronger even as he sat in prison writing out of a joy and love for the church of Jesus Christ. It is this deep abiding sense of who we are to which we are invited – no – exhorted to be 'just like Paul.'

'Join in imitating me, brothers and sisters.' With this firm sense of belonging and identity, Paul's ministry was always moving beyond himself. Because he was so rooted in Christ and Christ's selfless love, his actions and words always invited others to join him in this life of sacrifice and praise. Paul longed for the church to understand that the fellowship of the body of Christ was never an end unto itself, but a means to inviting others in. We too are called to enjoy the fellowship of the church in a way of that speaks to others and invites them to a life deeply rooted in faith.

On a Sunday in which we celebrate the gifts of women in the work and ministry of the church, we recognize that commitment to a life of service and sacrifice which Paul lifts up for us today, has characterized this work in the church. The ministries and faith of women are lifted up by Paul in the earliest days of the church, while we might look back in the life of this particular congregation and recall the resolve of those who envisioned and proclaimed a continuing ministry in this place when membership was small at the time. Or the early officers in the life of the Women's Auxiliary, who helped to establish a place for women to use their gifts and talents in new and creative ways.

Today we look around and see that both women and men are deeply engaged in ministry in many ways here and throughout the world. We also look around and know that like the Philippians, there are many voices competing for our attention and so the hard work of discipleship continues in our day.

When I think back to those stubborn weeds surrounding the pine tree, and the endurance they had against my vigorous efforts to pull them out – I'm reminded that it is this deep rootedness in Christ that helps us discern the faithful way even amidst the loud and aggressive noise which seems to come from all directions. But I am also reminded that Paul's ministry was not one of safety and seclusion – he served in the midst of those voices, always intending to share with others his conviction, born out of his deep sense of belonging.

The faithful ministry of the church continues in the midst of many competing voices. And just like Paul, we continue to live out of the conviction that we belong to Christ, inviting others to experience the same. Amen.