

Trinity 22 (2025)

Ten years ago, this past June, I was invited back to the church I attended as a child.

It was a bittersweet experience as the church was closing its doors. The neighborhood had changed . . . a security guard was needed in the parking lot each Sunday.

More than that, those who continued to attend were getting on in years, and many had moved to other areas.

So, the decision was made, instead of going out with a whipper, to go out with a great service of remembrance and thanksgiving. Such a service was scheduled and around 400 attended.

It was sad to sit in the pew where I had sat with my parents as a child and know that this was the last service.

It was good, however, to see so many old friends, people who had meant a great deal to me when I was growing up.

Following the service, a potluck lunch was held at which many memories were shared.

After eating, I walked through the education building which opened in 1963.

Each classroom brought back memories. In the Primary Department, I could see Mrs. Siffries – she was an English war bride -- sitting in a rocking chair telling Bible stories to the children gathered round her.

Down the hall, I could see Mr. and Mrs. Williams showing us how to press autumn leaves between sheets of wax paper using an iron.

In the room opposite this classroom, was an office where posters of Bible scenes were kept

. . . presided over by Mrs. Crecink. Stout and always wearing dark blue or black, she ran the Primary Department like a general!

One floor up in the Junior Department, I could see Ann Preston, the Minister's wife, standing behind a podium conducting the opening Sunday School assembly,

As I remember these and others, I can say with sincerity and thankfulness: **“I have the most pleasant memories.”**

These same words – “I have the most pleasant memories” -- is the heading the editors of J.B. Phillips' New Testament chose to place over today's passage from Philippians.

Though not a part of the inspired text, these words nevertheless represent the spirit of the apostle's words concerning his Christians friends in the Philippi, the first city on the European continent to receive the Gospel.

Paul founded this church around A.D. 50 during his Second Missionary Journey.

Now, more than 10 years later, as he sits in jail not sure if he will get out alive or not, he fondly remembers his friends in Phillipi and their fellowship together.

Fellowship here means more than hanging out with each other at the coffee hour. It means partnership in the Gospel. As the years had passed, these folk had continued to support Paul and his ministry in practical ways. Most recently, they had sent a gift to him while he was in jail.

Remembering their love and support was a source of great encouragement for Paul.

These memories, along with God's abiding presence, enabled him to remain free in mind and spirit.

"A mind is its own place. Can make a heaven out of hell, a hell out of heaven" to quote a line from Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

Well, Paul chose the former.

Remembering these friends even gave him **joy**, the very last thing you would think to find in a jail.

Surely, there is something we can learn from Paul's example. As those who have been marked as Christ's own in our baptism, we don't have to let circumstances define or defeat us.

Regardless of what happens to us, we have a secure future. In the words of Martin Luther's great hymn:

*The body they may kill:
God's truth abideth still;
his kingdom is forever!*

One Bible commentator, reflecting on today's passage, has written:

“It is a glorious revelation of how life in fellowship with Christ triumphs over all adverse circumstances. The triumph, moreover, is not that of stoical indifference. It is rather the recognition of the fact that all apparently adverse conditions are made allies of the soul and ministers of victory, under the dominion of the Lord.”

That was Paul's way. Make it your way.

Last week, we were reminded in our reading from Ephesians that a war going on.

“We are up against the unseen power that controls this dark world, and spiritual agents from the very headquarters of evil,” we were told, quoting J.B. Phillips' translation.

In response, Paul tells his readers **“to be strong in the Lord and in the power of his might.”**

In today’s passage we find him following his own advice.

Jesus’ people in every age have faced opposition. Today is no exception, especially if you live in places like China and Nigeria. Being a follower of Jesus in those counties may well land you prison or even cost you your life.

In the West, the situation at the moment is different. We too face war, but it is a war of ideas and world views and personal struggles. Yet, we don’t have to let this opposition defeat us.

We have Jesus’ promise in the Great Commission: **“Lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world (age).”**

We also have the encouragement of Christian friends. Spend some time this week remembering and naming some of them, in particular those who have been influential in your life.

But don't stop there. Do as Paul did, pray for them. If they have gone to be with the Lord, give thanks for their lives and the influence they had on you.

If they are still alive, pray that the good work God has begun in them will continue right up to the "day of Christ."

"Day of Christ," as Paul uses this expression in today's Epistle, is almost certainly a reference to Jesus' Second Coming, at which time His believing people will be openly acknowledged and vindicated.

In the meantime, Paul prays that their love will increase more and more.

I should note here that the love of which Paul speaks involves action. It's more than a feeling, a matter of the heart.

As I have already said, the Philippians had given of their resources that the Gospel might go out.

Now, Paul prays that this active, doing love may continue and grow.

Making a good beginning is easy, but carrying on finish line is much harder.

This past week I heard the story of a young mother who was given a bad medical diagnosis. Previous to this diagnosis she and her husband had been Easter and Christmas Christians.

After receiving it, she resolved to do better. She asked her minister to pray for her healing. The whole church family joined in. She told

God that if He healed her, she and her family would take their Christian calling more seriously. They would be in church every Sunday.

Then, to her doctor's surprise, she got well. Her cancer went into remission.

After first, she and her whole family were at church every Sunday.

But it was not long before their zeal began to wane, and they returned to being nominal Christians.

Something similar happened after 9-11. For a while, churches were full. It seemed that a great revival was taking place in America. But did it last? /// Sadly, no.

Continuing, carrying on to the finish line, is the mark of true discipleship. That is what Paul

prays will be the case with his beloved Christians friends in Philippi.

Finally, Paul prays that these same friends may “approve those things that are excellent.” This is one of loveliest statements found in the Bible.

It reminds me of a book Jimmy Carter wrote back in 1975 at the beginning of his bid for the Presidency. That title was: “Why Not the Best?”

Being mediocre is not enough. Only the best will do. And that is what God wants to give each one of us – His best. In response, let’s resolve to give Him our best. // Choices abound:

What movies do you watch . . . What books do you read . . . What do you think about in your spare time . . . What do you spend your money on? These are choices we all make daily.

Many things that occupy people's time and attention are not 'wicked' in and of themselves, but they may not be the best. We should ask:

What things bring about personal growth? Which best serves the interest of others? Which gives glory to God? Which point men and women to the Saviour? Which at the end of life's day will count?

In closing: today's Epistle is full of practical instruction, as I hope you have seen.

In summary: remember those who have encouraged you in your Christian life; give thanks for them; if they are alive, pray that their witness and active love will continue and expand; and finally, for yourself, go for the best, "approve those things that excellent."

Enough, I dare say, to keep us busy for the coming week and for a lifetime!