

September 20, 2020
Maricopa Lutheran Church, AZ
Pentecost + 16

COVID, Paul, and Christ

Does COVID quarantine feel a little bit like being in prison with an uncertain future? Maybe, depending on our health and how daring we are about getting out.

Being in prison and facing possible execution literally was Paul's situation in today's second lesson, as he wrote to a young church about life and death. Even though our situations are much different than Paul's, maybe his words still can help us now.

As he faced death, Paul wrote, "Living is Christ." What does this mean to us? Here's an idea that is both very simple and very hard to do: What if we consciously invite Jesus Christ to be present with us in every moment of life: work, play, everything?

Let's unpack this idea. Most relationships are a rough balance of give and take, sometimes fair, sometimes not. Most of us get what we really need most of the time, with some horrible exceptions.

What if we consciously invite Jesus Christ into all of our relationships all of the time, so that the Spirit of Christ would guide both our giving and our taking?

So, when we enjoy each other's company, it's as though our Lord is the host, or the party is not for us. Whether we give to others or not, it's as though we are giving or not for the sake of Christ. When we receive what others give, it's as though it's coming from Christ; and if it's not something we think our Lord would give, we decline the gift.

If we practiced this "Christ consciousness" several times a day, it might become habit forming. What difference would that make in our families, our friendships, our work, and every other aspect of our lives? Might we be more fair and even more loving? Might we not tolerate so much of what damages people?

Here's the warning: Those who love know that real love involves sacrifice. When we invite our Savior into our lives, this means taking up our crosses to follow him. It means trusting that sharing his love is worth our sacrifices.

Now for a contrast. The default position for most religious folk most of the time is for God to have an honored room in the mansions of our lives. Paul wrote about something very different. He wrote about God being the architect of our mansions, God being the one who directs the goals, the foundation, and the design of how we live.

"Living is Christ" does not mean putting Christ in a religious part of our lives and everybody else in different parts, with maybe a few overlaps on Sunday morning. Rather, it means that the Spirit of Christ lives through us, even with our flaws, as we live with other people. It means that we love Christ, however imperfectly, through how we treat these people.

Paul also wrote, "Dying is gain." What's this about? Paul realized that Jesus already has been renewing this world. This began with his life, his death, his resurrection, and the gift of his Holy Spirit. Obviously, this renewal still has a long, long way to go. But Paul believed the promise that Jesus would come again, raise the dead, and finish the job.

For Paul knew that heaven is not an escape from this world. Rather, it's a safe place to wait until Jesus returns, makes all things new, and puts us to work in a new creation. Not only are our sufferings not worth comparing to "the glory yet to be revealed to us," but neither are our most cherished joys. Indeed, even the greatest blessings of this age are like just the buds on a tree at the earliest days of spring.

Clearly, we need God's help in order to trust his promises. That's especially hard for take-charge people like Paul. This trust also is hard for people who have suffered even more than Paul did.

So how did Paul keep the faith? Here's a short list of things that nurtured Paul's faith and that also can nurture ours.

By all indications, Paul prayed a lot, he knew his Bible extremely well, and Holy Communion was very important to him. Again and again, Paul acted on the faith that he already did have.

Through these ways and more, the Spirit of Jesus was renewing Paul and nurturing his faith day by day. Paul knew Jesus in the best and worst of living this life. So, he trusted Jesus for eternal life.

There's at least one more important thing about today's lesson. Paul would rather "depart and be with Christ." But he thought that the Philippians needed his physical presence a bit longer. So, he accepted this as his calling, at least for a while, and he served according to the need of his people.

What a basis for peace that is. For Paul, "Living is Christ." So, each day brought new opportunities for God's kingdom to come and his will to be done on earth as it is in heaven.

For Paul, "Dying is gain." He had put his life in the hands of the Lord who died for him, who rose from the dead, and who would renew Paul and the whole creation.

So, Paul hoped in Christ in spite of every temptation and threat. Rather than strive for his will, Paul embraced his Savior's will. So, he knew the peace that passes understanding.

I see Paul as a wonderful example and teacher. I don't know anybody personally who appears to be at Paul's level of faith, but only God knows for sure. I have seen people seem to have moments when they treated others the way they would hope to treat Christ. I've seen people seem to have moments when they calmly saw their deaths as a way to be closer to their Lord. I've seen people seem to have moments when they acted according to what others need rather than according to their own desires.

With the help of the Holy Spirit, who nurtures us through Word and Sacrament, through prayer, and through each other, may you and I have more and more of these moments ourselves, so that Christ may live in us and we may live in him for all eternity, starting anew here and now. Amen

Pastor Carl A. Jensen, livingsystemsconsult@gmail.com