

“Live a Worthy Life”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
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Philippians 1: 21-30

“Live a worthy life.” I imagine that would be a motto most, if not all, of us would seek to strive for. It is usually at the time of death that we reflect on the worthiness of one’s life. When I lead a committal service at the cemetery, I will often use this very familiar prayer: “O Lord, support us all the day long until the shadows lengthen and the evening comes, and the busy world is hushed, and the fever of life is over, and our work here is done. Then, in your mercy, grant us a safe lodging, and a holy rest, and peace at the last” (Book of Common Worship, Pastoral Edition, 228). It is in the work that we do here that we value our worthiness before God, and seek a safe lodging, a holy rest, and peace with our Maker when the evening finally comes.

How do we judge whether someone has lived a “worthy” life? Is it by the quantity of years lived, or by the quality of those years? Is it by the length of service to Christ’s Church, or by the impact their faith had on others? Is it by their vocation, their family, their relationships with friends and strangers? Is it by their being out front leading other disciples in the faith, or is it by their unseen yet equally as influential work done behind the scenes?

Our definition of “a worthy life” is most definitely subject to personal opinion and judgment. What one person sees as worthy, another person might view as inconsequential or nondescript. Our opinions are shaped by the depth of impact others have had on us, and those levels of worthiness are unique to each individual. And yet how others judge our worthiness is incredibly important to us, isn’t it? That’s because we place our self-worth in the hands of our friends, our co-workers, our neighbors, our families – and we want to be reassured that who we are in their eyes is worthy and acceptable.

And yet, in the end, what matters most in judging our worthiness has nothing to do with performance reviews or people’s opinions. What matters most is how our life is viewed in the eyes of our God: the one who created us, the one who redeems us, and the one who sustains us. In God’s eyes, a worthy life is measured by one criteria: “live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ” (1:27). Don’t just live a worthy life; live a life worthy of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

When Paul is writing this letter to the Philippians, he is not out on the mission trail visiting his other churches. No, as we read in the verses preceding this passage (1:17), Paul is writing this letter from prison. It is not certain where Paul was imprisoned when he wrote to the Philippians, but we know from the Book of Acts that on three different occasions Paul was imprisoned during his ministry to the early church.

Thus, when we listen to Paul's voice, there is a feeling that this could be it for him, that "the fever of life" might soon be over. Listen: "For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I prefer" (1:21-22). In fact, he's really not sure what might happen after he writes to the church: "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" (1:23-24). When one is imprisoned, hope can disappear quickly, and the will to live can evaporate without much effort. The struggle which Paul describes here is very familiar to many who have been imprisoned, for when your days are spent in monotonous routine, you begin to wonder how much more you can take of such a life.

One commentator shares about Victor Frankl, a survivor of the Holocaust, and his experiences in the concentration camps. *Where hundreds of prisoners acquiesced to dozens of soldiers, Frankl speaks of the loss of hope, which robs people of their will to live and to face life's difficulties. People start dying when they lose hope. That was why the words "Work Creates Freedom," which adorned the entrance of the first German concentration camp at Dachau, could have more appropriately been replaced by the words from Dante's "Divine Comedy": "Abandon hope, all who enter this place." Frankl speaks of the freedom we possess that helps us determine our attitudes and spiritual well-being. The person who has nothing to live for will lose hope and die quickly. That is what Paul is trying to counteract in this passage. It is God's will that we experience life and not death.*

We are called to choose life. Paul speaks of the struggle between wanting to embrace death, which would allow him to be in the presence of Christ, and to stay in life, which would allow him to continue to witness of the power of the resurrected One. He chooses life (Gilberto Collazo, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2011: 86-88).

In choosing life, Paul reaffirms why living for the gospel is considered a worthy life by our God. "So that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit" (1:27). When we strive for life, choose to follow Christ, seek to love as God has loved us – when we live such a worthy life, then whether we are together or apart, near or far, living faithfully in this world or having joined the saints in heaven above – we are then forever and always connected as the one Body of Christ.

And this connection with others happens in times of joy and in times of suffering. Paul writes, "For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well" (1:29). Indeed, he writes to a church that has been persecuted for their beliefs, referenced as well by what he says in verse 30: "since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have." He seeks to offer encouragement and hope to those Philippians who might be suffering, even imprisoned as he is, so that they would choose life over death, and hope over despair.

I think Paul offers us an important reminder in this last part of the passage. Living a life worthy of the gospel does not mean we are immune from suffering and pain. Shoot – he wrote these words of encouragement and hope from a prison! He of all people knew that suffering and pain were real, and that just believing in the gospel would not free you from grief, sadness, or hardship. There might be some in our modern world who preach such a gospel, who proclaim that if you believe in Christ, then you will no longer experience difficulties in life. Not only is that inaccurate, it is contrary to the words of Jesus, who says in John’s Gospel: “I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world” (John 16:33, NIV).

Living a life worthy of the gospel does not insulate us from the world’s pain and suffering. That is not what Paul is promising. Instead, *this text from Philippians is an invitation to focus on hope, to find joy in the midst of all of life’s circumstances, so that God may be glorified. Gospel living is not about finding an easy way out. It is about learning to see hope and possibilities even in the darkest moments of our lives* (*ibid*).

Steve Hayner is the president of Columbia Theological Seminary in Atlanta, one of our ten Presbyterian seminaries in the United States. Dr. Hayner began as president of Columbia in 2009, and has provided excellent, inspired leadership to that community these past five years.

This past spring, he learned that he had cancer. Not just any cancer – but pancreatic cancer. He was in excellent physical health otherwise, and this allowed him to begin very aggressive treatments immediately upon diagnosis. However, some recent tests revealed that those treatments had only made a marginal difference, and in his words, “the remainder of my life on this earth is now to be counted in weeks and months.” Dr. Hayner is 66-years-old.

What has been powerful about his experience is how he and his wife have been very open and honest with their faith throughout this very difficult time. Through the CaringBridge web site, they have interacted with thousands of students, colleagues, friends, alumni, and supporters, sharing their faith story along this journey.

I was struck by what he wrote recently on that site, and I wanted to share that with you, as it relates to living a life worthy of the gospel – throughout all that life contains. Dr. Hayner writes:

There is a much bigger story of which this is only a tiny part. And it is God’s story of love, hope, forgiveness, reconciliation and joy. We went into this journey choosing to trust God and to offer our fears to God. We’ve been so grateful for the freedom from fear and the abundance of peace that we have experienced. There are, of course, times of discouragement, grief, pain, and wonder. After all, there are a lot of unknowns ahead of us.

Many are praying for one of God’s “big” miracles. We are as well. But it is not how God answers prayer that determines our response to God. God is committed to my ultimate healing. But being cured of my cancer may or may not be a part of that healing work . . .

I truly don't know what God has planned. None of us really know what the physical symptoms of my cancer will be over time. I could receive "healing" through whatever means, or I could continue to deteriorate.

But life is about a lot more than physical health. It is measured by a lot more than medical tests and vital signs. More important than the more particular aspects of God's work with us is God's overall presence with us, nourishing, equipping, transforming, empowering, and sustaining us for whatever might be God's call to my life today . . .

Yes, I'm really eager to know what is happening in my body to this cancer. But whatever (happens), I am more eager that it would help me to be more attentive, more grateful, more loving, more joyful and more gracious (*The Presbyterian Outlook*, September 15, 2014, 16-17).

When the shadows lengthen and the evening comes, may we trust that our life has been worthy in the eyes of our God. And as we are privileged to walk each day in the light of God's love, may our devotion to God grow wider, our faith in Christ grow deeper, and our trust in the Spirit's leading grow stronger, as we strive to live a life worthy of the gospel of Christ.

Thanks be to God. Amen.