

Hear what the Spirit is saying

Sunday Morning at St. Hugh's in Idyllwild, California

October 4, 2020 | Pentecost +18

Collect for Proper 22

Almighty and everlasting God, you are always more ready to hear than we to pray, and to give more than we either desire or deserve: Pour upon us the abundance of your mercy, forgiving us those things of which our conscience is afraid, and giving us those good things for which we are not worthy to ask, except through the merits and mediation of Jesus Christ our Savior; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen. ~BCP 234

Isaiah 5:1-7 NRSV

In our opening lesson the prophet sings a sad parable about God's vineyard, Israel, and the destruction that must now come upon it.

¹ Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. ² He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; he expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes. ³ And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. ⁴ What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it? When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? ⁵ And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. ⁶ I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. ⁷ For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!

Philippians 3:4b-14 NRSV

Paul reminds the new Christians at Philippi that if any have reason to brag because of heritage, lineage, or zeal, it is he. Yet all human achievements are to be counted as rubbish next to the joy and privilege of knowing God in Christ

^{4b} If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: ⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

⁷ Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. ⁸ More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have

suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. ¹⁰ I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

¹² Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. ¹³ Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

Matthew 21:33-46 NRSV

Our gospel is the story of the wicked and disloyal tenants who are cast out of the vineyard.

³³ [Jesus said], “Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. ³⁴ When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. ³⁵ But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. ³⁶ Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. ³⁷ Finally he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ ³⁸ But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.’ ³⁹ So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. ⁴⁰ Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” ⁴¹ They said to him, “He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.” ⁴² Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the scriptures: ‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is amazing in our eyes’? ⁴³ Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. ⁴⁴ The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.” ⁴⁵ When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. ⁴⁶ They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

Psalm 80:7-14 BCP 614

Our Psalm Response is a lament and a plea to the Lord, the shepherd of Israel, that the Lord will restore God's ravaged vineyard.

- 7 Restore us, O God of hosts; * show the light of your countenance,
and we shall be saved.
- 8 You have brought a vine out of Egypt; * you cast out the nations and
planted it.
- 9 You prepared the ground for it; * it took root and filled the land.
- 10 The mountains were covered by its shadow * and the towering cedar
trees by its boughs.
- 11 You stretched out its tendrils to the Sea * and its branches to the
River.
- 12 Why have you broken down its wall, * so that all who pass by pluck
off its grapes?
- 13 The wild boar of the forest has ravaged it, * and the beasts of the
field have grazed upon it.
- 14 Turn now, O God of hosts, look down from heaven; behold and tend
this vine; * preserve what your right hand has planted.

Love of Christ: A Prayer

*I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing
Christ Jesus my Lord.* Philippians 3:8

Lord Jesus, you know everything:
you know that I love you.

How could it be otherwise?

For it was you who first loved me,
the unlovely and unlovable,
and died for me, pardoned me
and welcomed me into your family.

Lord, you know everything:

you know that I love you.¹

¹ Frank Colquhoun, *Prayers for today*, The Society For Promoting Christian Knowledge (January 1, 1989)

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.

Philippians 2:6 NRSV



Philippians 3:4b-14. A Pastoral Perspective

By Jill Y. Crainshaw, Associate Professor and Academic Dean, Wake Forest University Divinity School, Winston-Salem, North Carolina

Nearly two thousand years and incalculable kilobytes of technological innovation stand between Paul's first-century writings and contemporary readers. People in the United States today are more likely to communicate with friends, relatives, and coworkers, even with people across the globe, by way of blogs, e-mails, or text messages than through hand-scripted, envelope-sealed letters delivered by couriers. Despite differences in communication techniques, however, contemporary believers share with Paul a common goal. We, like Paul, want others to be persuaded when we express the beliefs and values most important to us.

Paul uses a first-century rhetorical form to communicate with Christians in the diverse and busy town of Philippi. Rhetoric is an ancient Greco-Roman art of argumentation and discourse. Paul was a rhetorical artist, crafting letters imprinted with his unique language and distinctive theological ideas. Philippians 3:4b–14 exemplifies Paul's artistry.

According to biblical scholar Cynthia Briggs Kittredge, the epistle, read as a unified whole, imitates a four-part style common to Greco-Roman letter writing. The *exordium* (1:1–26) opens the correspondence, introducing the letter's main themes. Paul expresses gratitude for the community (1:3–5) and speaks poignantly about his current imprisonment and suffering (1:12–14). He also encourages believers at Philippi to continue their gospel work (1:27–28). The *narratio* (1:27–30) summarizes historical events that prompted Paul to write the letter. The *probatio* (2:1–3:21), including 3:4b–14, gives examples to support Paul's call to action. The final part of the letter, the *peroratio* (4:1–23), recaps the main points and passionately invites readers to say yes to Paul's challenge.¹

¹ Cynthia Briggs Kittredge, *Community and Authority: The Rhetoric of Obedience in the Pauline Tradition* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press Int., 1998), 65–66.

In the initial verses of the *probatio* (2:1–3:4a), Paul features Timothy, Epaphroditus, and Jesus as examples of how to live a gospel-worthy life. Then, in 3:4b–14, Paul uses himself as an example. Following an ancient rhetorical principle, he gives a personal testimony.

Contemporary ears sometimes hear Paul’s autobiographical speech making as arrogance. However, autobiographical arguments were common to the rhetoric of Paul’s time. A speaker’s personal character was considered a valid, even powerful, tool of persuasion. Paul wants readers to know that he has experienced firsthand God’s love in Christ. Paul also wants readers to know that he himself strives to live out the message he preaches. In the minds of first-century readers, Paul’s personal story authenticated his message and gave his voice authority.

Preachers today are sometimes reluctant to follow Paul’s autobiographical example. Perhaps too many know firsthand the pitfalls of being too personally vulnerable in the pulpit. Also, today’s rhetorical milieu differs greatly from that of first-century Philippi. Philippians 3:4b–14 nevertheless stands as a reminder. The proclaimer’s authenticity enlivens and gives credibility to the proclamation. Biblical scholar James W. Thompson puts it this way: “In an era when preaching cannot compete in the communications revolution, the essential quality that is unique to preaching is the authenticity of the preacher.”²

Paul uses personal testimony and other examples to authenticate and energize his call to action. What is that call? Paul encourages the believers at Philippi to hold on to and live out core Christian values. The primary goal of faith, in Paul’s view, is to know or experience Christ. Communal life is to be centered on attaining this ultimate prize. None of the identity markers that say we are people of faith is more important than a community’s heart-centered desire to know and to be like Christ.

Paul skillfully capitalizes on the rhetorical style of his day to communicate gospel values. This is not a new practice. Preachers and faith communities since antiquity have innovatively employed popular communication techniques to proclaim the gospel.

The same is true today. A June 1, 2009 issue of *Time* magazine tantalized readers with this article headline: “Twittering in Church. Why Some Pastors Are Turning to Microblogging to Bring Congregants Closer to God and One Another.” After appearing on the technological scene in 2006 as a computer designer’s side project, Twitter has transformed the

² James W. Thompson, *Preaching Like Paul: Homiletical Wisdom for Today* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 146.

landscape of Internet communication. What makes Twitter unique is that chatters, or “tweeters,” are allowed only 140 characters to speak their minds, share a joke, comment on the news, or report their morning breakfast choices (all of which happen simultaneously on Twitter). People who “tweet” have to make every word count.

A Charlotte, North Carolina, pastor, Todd Hahn, was interviewed for the *Time* magazine article. Hahn encouraged churchgoers to “tweet” during his Easter Sunday sermon. He wanted worshipers to tell others—coworshipers in the sanctuary *and* others tweeting across town or in another state—about their experiences with God. He wanted them to tweet their personal testimonies, using 140 characters or less, of course. “It’s a huge responsibility of a church,” Hahn says, “to leverage whatever’s going on in the broader culture to connect people to God and to each other.”

Versions of Hahn’s words can be heard in myriad contemporary discussions about worship practices, preaching techniques, and pastoral leadership styles. What communication practices are most effective for sharing the gospel? Which are most appropriate? How do we decide? Though ancient, Paul’s style and message in Philippians 3:4b–14 may contribute wisdom to these discussions.

Paul makes use of communication techniques familiar to his audience. His letter-writing style both mirrors and expands upon the Greco-Roman forms of his day. Paul’s rhetorical choices, however, take a backseat to what he considers the heart of his message. The primary aim of the life of faith, Paul insists in this letter, is to know Christ. Believers are called first and foremost to pursue and share that “prize” with personal and communal authenticity.

As to whether or not Twitter belongs in worship—about that, we can blog.

Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year A, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, vol. 4 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011).