

St. Thomas and Philippi

Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost

October 1, 2017

Philippians 2:1-13

Just as teachers aren't supposed to have favorite students, apostles aren't supposed to have favorite churches. But the apostle Paul really loved the church at Philippi.

It all started when Paul had a vision of a man from Macedonia asking Paul to "come over and help us." So Paul went. Philippi was a city in the region of Macedonia. To us, it seems like just a hop, skip, and jump from Jerusalem, but to Paul it was a world away. Paul was entering a new continent. This is where the gospel of Jesus Christ entered Europe.

Philippi was an interesting place. Gold and silver mines were nearby, so it had always been valuable to the Greek and Roman empires. It was near the sea so it had some strategic importance. But the population remained relatively small until Emperor Augustus made it a retirement community for soldiers who had served him. When the soldiers moved there, others followed. By Paul's time, the community included a mix of folks. A small percentage were wealthy, about 45% were skilled laborers and merchants, 25% were retired folks, and 20% were slaves.

When Paul arrived, he ran into a woman called Lydia, which just happens to be my first name, no relation. She was with a group of women who went to the river each Sabbath to pray. The other women were probably Jewish – Paul usually looked for Jewish congregations when he entered a new town. Lydia was Gentile who worshipped Yahweh with the Jews. After listening to Paul, she must have invited her husband to come and see because both of them decided to be baptized – Paul's first European converts. Lydia invited Paul to stay in their home. It is not clear how long he stayed – maybe a few months. Others joined the community during that time.

One day in Philippi, Paul and Silas met a slave girl who worked as a fortune teller. The scriptures say she had a spirit of divination. Paul ordered the spirit to leave the girl. She was set free and in her right mind, but her owners were angry because they had used her to make money. So her owners stirred up the crowds in Philippi to attack Paul and Silas and throw them in jail.

Rather than despair, Paul and Silas started singing. According to Acts 16, they sang hymns and prayed all night while the other prisoners and guards listened. Late in the night, the town was rocked by an earthquake, which shook the chains holding the prisoners loose. The jailer

panicked, thinking everyone had escaped and he would be held responsible. When he drew his sword to kill himself, Paul and Silas stopped him. “We’re all here,” Paul said. The jailer was so impressed he asked to be baptized, he and his whole family. The next day, Paul and Silas were released from prison but warned by the authorities to leave the city. They stopped by Lydia’s house to say goodbye to the Church at Philippi and went on their way.

Think about who might have gathered to say goodbye. The church at Philippi was led by a Gentile woman. Her husband was there, along with the Roman jailer and his family. That slave girl had probably joined them. I imagine some of the Jewish women Paul met on his first day in town were there as well. Women, men, Jew, Gentile, slave, free.

Later, Paul would write to another church and say that in Christ God had torn down the dividing wall between people. “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” He wrote it to the church at Galatia, but I’ve always thought Paul had Philippi in mind. The Church at Philippi lived out that witness in a powerful way.

Paul made at least two more visits to Philippi in person. The church grew. It never became as large as the church in, say, Corinth or Rome. But what it lacked in size, it made up for in welcome and love and generosity.

And about ten years after meeting Lydia by the river, Paul wrote this letter to his beloved Philippian church. Paul was in prison again. He wrote to assure his friends that he was okay, that just as he and Silas prayed and sang from the jail in Philippi, once again though his body was in prison his spirit was free.

You can hear his love and hope and confidence. Make my joy complete, he says. Be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.

The way to the unity he wanted for them was to follow the path of Jesus. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself.

This self-emptying led to the transformation of the whole world – that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

Paul trusted that the same power that raised Jesus from the dead was at work in them. For it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

St. Thomas has a lot in common with the church at Philippi. Like Philippi, we are in a city of soldiers. Like Philippi, we are a church of many different kinds of people. We are wealthy, not so wealthy, lifelong Columbus residents, new arrivals from everywhere, cradle Episcopalians and spiritual refugees, LGBTQ and straight, married, single, older, younger. Like Philippi, we’re

not as big as some of the churches downtown. Sadly a lot of people in Columbus still don't know we're here, but when they find us they often realize they've come home.

Paul encourages us with the same words he showered on his friends. Be of the same mind, having the same love. Be like Jesus, who gave himself fully and completely. Through the gift of his life, God defeated death and made the whole creation new. That same power is at work in us. Paul saw the gospel come alive in Philippi the way we see the gospel come alive here.

And I know many of you love St. Thomas the way Paul loved the church at Philippi. You show it in your faithfulness in worship. You show it by teaching Sunday School and singing with the choir and gathering to learn. You show it by serving through our many outreach partners.

And you show it in giving. Financial gifts are only part of the story, but they are important because these gifts enable this community to exist. They enable us to be a community of welcome and service and learning and worship for all people.

Our vestry and I believe God is calling St. Thomas to grow even stronger. St. Thomas has important work to do in this community. At breakfast today we outlined our goals for 2018, and these are described in your pledge packets. I hope you will study them, pray about them, and support them.

But even if St. Thomas already had all the money we could possibly use, we would still be called to give, because we are called to be like Jesus. We are called to empty ourselves, to give ourselves away so that God may raise us up. Setting aside a portion of the money God entrusts to us is a symbol of submitting all our lives to God as Jesus did. When we empty ourselves, God raises us to new and joyful life.

So let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus. For it is God who is at work in you. Amen.