**His Good Pleasure**

The broader context of Paul’s letter to the Philippians is this. It makes sense that as the church year progresses we grow through the waiting and exaltation of Advent, through the revealing and then the suffering of Jesus. Then we rejoice in the resurrection, the spiritual awakening of Pentecost, then we get down to Christian living.

We have been seeing passages these latter weeks of the season of Pentecost that talk about our relations with each other. In particular how we ought not to judge (Joseph in the OT), how we ought to have a holy tolerance for our differences of both opinion and conscience (Romans 14), and how we ought to eschew bitterness and retribution and embrace the openness of the heart of God (Jonah).

The more particular context is Paul’s letter to the Philippians, a church he planted on his 2nd missionary journey, and the first church on the European continent (he crosses the Aegean Sea from Turkey to Macedonia, or Greece). It is a Roman colony and he preaches in Greek; it has a lot of retirees from the Roman army, who would retire to estates with their slaves after their service. Remember? It is in Philippi Paul casts out the spirit of divination from the slave girl and owners resent it, and Paul is sent to jail… (see Acts 16). It doesn’t say there is a synagogue there, but I’m sure there must have been.

The purpose of the letter, which he writes from prison elsewhere, is the exhortation to live out the faith that they received from him, all the more since he is now absent.

Isn’t it kind of strange that we, in this world that seems to be falling apart, fires, pandemic, the struggle against the rise of nationalism and authoritarianism, racial unrest, gather together on Sunday to read ancient texts? Isn’t it singular that we look to the immense richness of the ancient biblical tradition to guide us today? We Christians believe that the themes that arise in that literature, itself a 4000-year conversation about God (Abraham to Jesus to today), we believe that what it teaches over and over, in the long arc of its narrative, is the path of light for us. Aren’t we a peculiar people!?

**In the Text**

This is a wonderful passage and so familiar. My approach to the passage is quite “exegetical,” that is, looking quite closely at Paul’s language and trying to extract meaning for our lives.

It is very personal and we feel as though we are listening to an intimate conversation about the deepest things of life.

Paul urges us to adopt, once again, a loving attitude to one another.

…be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. (Phil 2:2)

He bids us be humble.

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves (2:3)

Then Paul quotes a current hymn that is being passed around the church. He was not its author most people think. You may notice in some of your Bibles, certainly the NRSV, that it is written in poetic verse form, like a Psalm or a song.

The hymn, sometimes called the Carmen Christi (vv6-11), is an early confessional statement which contains the essence of the emerging Christian theology of Jesus’ identity.

This is interesting because it shows that this understanding of the life of Jesus had taken root as a shared expression of the Christ by the mid-50s, 25 years after Jesus’ resurrection. It says there are three epochs of our understanding of Jesus.

First, it asserts his pre-existence, (v6): Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though in the form of God existing…

Second, he becomes a human being (incarnate) (vv 7-8) … but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. I.e. he emptied himself of his divinity or perhaps exited his divinity (kenoō), the so-called kenosis.

In that human form he is humiliated for our sake: And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.

Third, he is therefore highly exalted before God (vv 9-11).

***Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name  
    that is above every name,  
so that at the name of Jesus  
    every knee should bend…***

Paul quotes the hymn in the service of his paraenesis, his moral exhortation to us to be like Jesus, i.e. humble.

But it is verses 12 and 13 that I would like to focus on with in these few minutes we have together this morning.

Now that I am gone from you… work out your own salvation with fear and trembling…

We are told we should do this with fear and trembling… It is “…viewed as a positive sign of humility and submissiveness” (DBI, 892; e.g. Psalm 2:11, see Isa 66:2b).

Then we turn to the idea that we are to “work out our own salvation.” The word “work out” means “bring about, produce, create” (katergadzomai, Bauer, Arndt Gingrich). It’s not the idea that we earn it, but that we work away at making faith a way of life.

It is not up to someone else, Paul writes. It is up to each person to undertake the nurture and fulfilment of their commitment to the faith and the community of faith. Each person is a creator of the life of faith.

You are not my creator. I am not your creator; you create your unique working out of salvation.

So how do we “work out our own salvation.” I take it to mean we avail ourselves of the means of grace, to the Word, Table, fellowship, corporate worship, personal devotion, love for one another, acts of service and compassion, using our particular gifts for the good of all.” It’s not rocket science. It’s work!

The Good News is this… God responds to our working out of our salvation.

13 God will continually revitalize you, implanting within you the passion to do what pleases him. (Passion Translation)

We use the language of relationship with God. Do you have a relationship with God we are asked? I have never really known what to make of that language. Can a human have a relationship with God?

There is a synergy, a relationship where in God meets our efforts with his enabling Spirit and together we move toward his good pleasure.

This is the place of God’s good pleasure is where we want to dwell in our spiritual journey.

Here is a phrase it is worth pausing to consider: huper tēs eudokias “for the sake of his good will” (Blass Debrunner Funk; see also Mt 11:26 and Lk 10:21, it is his “good pleasure” to reveal himself to the children instead of the wise; Lk 2:14 peace on earth among those whom he favours, say the angels; Ro 10:1 Paul’s “heart’s desire”; Eph 5:1,9, again JC gives light to children “according to his good pleasure.

I wonder if this notion of “heart’s desire” perhaps captures the sense best. It is God’s “heart’s desire” to revitalize us, to plant within us the passion to do what pleases him, to produce his will in us. The journey of faith is not a contest against God and his impossible standards of holiness, it is a relationship.

There is one more significant layer to this. These are all plural nouns. So yes, we do this in our personal “relationship, synergy” with God, but the same principle applies to our corporate life.

We have now an ideal conception of community not only where we tolerate our differences and stay together in Christ, in doing so we experience together the enabling presence of God to do his good pleasure.

From the Text

You can always tell when I’ve picked Michel de Montaigne’s Essays back off the shelf when you start getting some quotations from the ancient classics, a corpus he was absurdly well acquainted with. I, alas, never studied the classics. Reading Montaigne (d 1593), he is a French Renaissance philosopher, has been a life-long habit for me. He is credited with inventing the essay, that is, the genre where he speaks and writes of his personal experience of life. Charming brief essays with titles like Of Fear, Of Moderation, Of Solitude, Of Cannibals. He has an essay entitled Against Do-Nothingness.

[Cervantes 1547-1616; Shakespeare 1564-1616; Montaigne 1533-1592]

The first way this may well apply to our lives today is that the Christian life is definitely against do-nothingness. We are against it! If you are going to “do-nothingness” with your faith you just aren’t going to make any progress on your journey.

And conversely, we are called to do-somethingness!

I used to think highly accomplished musicians were just naturally brilliant because of their gift. But now, after trying to get better at an instrument myself, I realize that mastery is all about the practice. People become masterful at their instruments because the practice. They work hard! Who knew?

And so it is with spiritual growth. To work out your salvation is a statement that progress is attainable.

The second point to make is that I’m afraid this “do-somethingness” never ends for us once we start our spiritual journey. The notion that I am going to arrive at a final destination has been disproved by a long life of experience when it comes to my walk of faith. And as much as I would prefer sometimes the quiet routine of do-nothingness, everyday it seems I find it necessary to work out my salvation, as Paul says.

In Montaigne’s he tells the story of the Emperor Vespasian, though on his deathbed with sickness, continued attending to the affairs of state. When his physician scolded him for the mortal harm this was to his health he said, “An emperor must die standing.”

I would alter that to say, “A Christian must die standing.”

We are never done working out our salvation. Our blessed synergy with God to do and walk in his good pleasure is with us to the end of our days. Let us do-somethingness and die standing!

Amen

Benediction:

Now may God fully satisfy every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen.

Have a wonderful afternoon!