

**14 Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 20 – Year A – September 21, 2011 - Homily**  
**Exodus 16:2-15; Psalm 105:1-6, 37-45; Philippians 1:21-30; Matthew 20:1-16**  
**Susan E. Wilmot**

After wandering in the wilderness for forty years, just as the Israelites are preparing to enter the Promised Land, Moses urgently exhorts the people, “I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. *Choose life* so that you and your descendants may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days” (Deuteronomy 30:19-20). His own life is about to end, and yet he is still selflessly teaching and guiding the Israelites in God’s ways. At the heart of Moses’ exhortation is the truth of humanity’s free will, our ability to choose. Moses encourages the people to choose God and God’s ways, knowing that this *is* the only way to abundant life.

Thousands of years later, Paul shares his thoughts with his closest friends and beloved community of faith at Philippi. The opening soliloquy is clearly the result of deep reflection on Christ’s life, death and resurrection, and his own life and ministry in Christ. What is not immediately apparent from the reading is that Paul is writing from a prison cell. He probably isn’t the first to do so, and he certainly isn’t the last. Prisoners such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Nelson Mandela, and Martin Luther King, Jr. have also written letters from jail. There’s something about prison that gives the prisoner time and space for reflection, and has a way of focusing our thoughts and prayers. Perhaps it’s because life hangs in the balance, or because our choices have become very narrow. Paul’s thoughts may be something of a surprise to us. He isn’t worried about dying. He isn’t fearful, or angry. He isn’t trying to justify himself in any way. In fact, he seems to welcome the prospect of death as the fulfillment of the promise of salvation, and the opportunity to be in the closer presence of our Lord, Jesus Christ. He makes it clear that his imprisonment and suffering is in no way a punishment for failing in his mission, but a cause to rejoice that he is indeed sharing in the suffering of Christ for the sake of the Gospel. Then, as if a prayer has been answered, or as if God has spoken directly to his heart, Paul’s thoughts quickly turn away from what **he** desires to what he knows God desires for him and for the benefit of the Philippians. Without writing it down, we start to understand that Paul’s prayer has been just like Jesus’ in the Garden of Gethsemane, culminating with “Father, not my will, but yours be done.” At that pivotal moment, Paul has insight and clarity of thought about his mission and ministry in Christ. Rather than dwelling on the advantages of being in the closer presence of Christ, Paul chooses life for the sake all those he serves, and for the sake of the Gospel.

At the heart of Paul’s decision, is the same love and selfless sacrifice shown by Jesus, first in emptying Himself to become fully human and live amongst us, and second in giving His life on the cross, for the life of the world. As Jesus did, Paul too finds the courage to look beyond himself, his own wants and needs, to see the bigger picture, and to put the needs of others before his own. Albert Einstein said it this way, “A human being is part of a whole... a part limited in time and space. However, we experience ourselves, our thoughts and feelings as something separate from the rest... This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circles of compassion.” Looking beyond self, caring for others is the gift of our discipleship in Christ, and our stewardship of God’s blessings. As Chaplain Andrew shared with us on Sunday, so often in the midst of the most devastating personal circumstances a wounded

soldier's greatest concern is for his comrade in arms. Despite his personal circumstances, Paul is convinced that it's necessary for him to remain in the flesh for the sake of the Gospel and for the sake of the Philippians. Despite his precarious position as a prisoner of Rome, he continues his teaching, and seeks ways in which to continue his mission to share the Good News of Jesus Christ. He may be a prisoner of injustice, stuck behind bars, but he is a free man in Christ.

Having discerned God's will, Paul tells the Philippians, "Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ." The loving dynamic of Paul's faith is to be fully alive in Christ. Again, this is a remarkable stance to take, given the circumstances. As Paul is struggling in jail, the community of faith in Philippi is out in the hostile world of a Roman ruled city, dealing with a culture that demands their allegiance to all kinds of gods, and one that has the power to punish and persecute them for none compliance. Paul is speaking on two levels here, asking the Philippians to be good citizens, and knowing that their true citizenship lies in heaven. As disciples of Jesus, we too are sojourners on earth, and our true citizenship lies in what St. Augustine calls the city of God, and what many of the Gospels call the kingdom of God. However, for Paul, living in Christ means being attentive and faithful to all aspects of our life, in order to honor God in all we do and say. Paul goes on to point out to the Philippians that their faithfulness and integrity of life as Christians is the bond that strengthens them against the enemies of Christ, and the false gods of the Empire. Maintaining our faith, even when the world mocks or persecutes us is a key part of living in Christ, and even expanding God's kingdom on earth. Trusting in God, our concern is less with visible or tangible results, and more with faithful stewardship of our God-given gifts and the Good News of Jesus Christ. Our faithful presence is enough for the Holy Spirit to work with in stirring the hearts and minds of others to experience the Lord Jesus through our witness and ministries. The important point here is that we know true freedom in Christ, and we cannot allow the world to imprison us in any way: either through hardship and suffering; by worldly distractions; or by using worldly measures of success to discourage or dishearten us.

God's will is that we experience life to the fullest now and eternally. Living our faith is part of being a good steward. There's a balance here between spirituality, loving God and loving our neighbors as ourselves, or faith in action, as we often call it. Paul teaches us that the bottom line is that we can't be so spiritually minded that we're no earthly good. Our faith in the promise of eternal life is fuel for abundant living now, and that so often means moving beyond self, caring for others, and putting the needs of others before our own. That's how God defines love and how Jesus exemplifies love in His own life. It's what Paul calls fruitful labor. We make choices every day. Moses said it. Paul said it. Jesus gives it to us in abundance. Choose life. Choose to live in Christ every day.

Amen.