

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A
The Rev Ian Burch
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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Longtime churchgoers will notice that the preacher almost always talks about the Gospels. And by the Gospels, we're talking about Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John for those of you a little rusty from Confirmation or Sunday School. Preachers have it drilled into our heads that the stories of Jesus—of the Christ—are the most important stories for Christians, and we reflect on those stories from the pulpit. I do my best to stay with the Jesus stuff when preaching, but sometimes the other readings can speak louder. Like this morning.

Think about this magnificent letter from Paul to the Philippians in the middle of the first century. Remember, these letters of Paul are the oldest documents we have about how the church shortly after the time of Jesus may have looked. The early church so valued these letters, that they began to keep them and read them when they gathered together—a tradition we have continued now for over two millennia. Paul, in many ways the founder of Christianity, is traveling all over the Mediterranean establishing communities who listen to the stories of Jesus and try to live differently because of his life, his death, and his resurrection. Paul is lukewarm about some of the churches he has planted but not the church at Philippi. He loves the people there and very much wants them to succeed. He opens up to them about his own life in Christ.

He sends this letter to encourage them and their lives together. And in it, he says some remarkable things. He presents his autobiography. In a way, he presents his CV, his resume. He says that, in every way that mattered, he was an exemplary follower of God. He was well versed in the scriptures. He completed all the correct rituals. He could recite chapter and verse of biblical law. He lived a blameless life, keeping himself away from all kinds of impurities. And, even though he was this superhero of virtue. There was something not quite right.

Paul realized something that most mystics teach and great spiritual leaders realize. We are not wholly empowered by our own virtue, by our own will to do good. Instead, we are filled with Christ and act as Christ's hands in this world. Or in Paul's words, "Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord." This might seem a little cerebral. I mean, who cares if it's the mystical Christ or just some kindly do-gooder serving the meals as long as the meals get served? Paul's point is this: there is a weakness in our species that's hard to ignore. We can be petty. We can be inward-looking. We can be evil, as I think anyone reading the news this week would agree. So, to rely totally on our own goodness will lead to disappointment.

I've seen some unkind back and forth on social media about whether we should take action in the face of evil or whether we should pray. What a silly distinction. Prayer is the fuel of action, and prayer is a compass for right action. Prayer helps us listen for God so that our Christ-like action might follow. Paul invites the churches to let Christ be this will inside us so that all other considerations fade. Because sometimes our other considerations lead us down a dangerous path.

Jesus is driving at this point as well in the parable. These vineyard workers turn themselves into a violent mob. They are swept away on a wave of greed and violence—even unto the killing of a messenger, the king’s son. There is something a little bit dark in the soul of people. Not really as a state of things—I don’t look at little babies and think “wow, there is a nest of evil.” Rather, there lives in people a potential to choose the wrong, to be swept up in bad things—war, violence, apathy, racism, greed, lust. You get the picture.

Paul is testifying that the antidote to all this is Christ. It is very hard to live into your worst inclination when you are filled with Christ’s spirit. And that’s why Paul says that he considers his admitting his own weakness to be his greatest strength. We live out a peculiar religion, my friends. We call peacemakers warriors, and we call our own weakness our strength. Because in our very weakness is where God has chosen to come and live. The baby in the manger. The mustard seed. The cross. These are the symbols of Christ in our midst. And, with Christ, we can move this world toward looking more like the kingdom of God. Even when the world seems bleak, we, like St. Paul, are strong because of Christ who lives in us. Amen.