

September 10, 2006
Jeremiah 15: 15-21, Philippians 1:1-18, 27-29
Dr. Lewis F. Galloway

“A Life Worth Living”

It is easy to lose your way and drift through life. Ann Tyler’s novel *Breathing Lessons* tells the story of a middle-aged couple named Maggie and Ira Moran. Their somewhat disappointing lives have not turned out to be quite what they thought they would be. Maggie and Ira are driving to attend the funeral of the husband of Maggie’s closest childhood friend. Riding down the road, Maggie thinks to herself, “Oh, this whole day was so terribly sad, the kind of day when you realize that everyone eventually got lost from everyone else... Maggie felt that the entire business of time’s passing was more than she could bear.” (p. 23)

Ira slows the car as he pulls up behind a slow moving “round-shouldered, humble looking car from the forties.” He thinks to himself, “Route One, the nursing home of highways.” Then Ira remembers “that this wasn’t Route One anymore, that they had drifted sideward or maybe even backward, and he had a dreaming floating sensation. It was like that old spell during a change of seasons when you momentarily forget what stage the year is going through. Is it spring, or is it fall? Is the summer just beginning, or is it coming to an end?” (pp. 154-155)

Individuals are not the only ones who can get lost. A whole people can lose their sense of who they are and where they are going. Fred Craddock says that the early church sometimes referred to “being lost in the world as having amnesia.” (*Interpretation Commentary on Philippians*, Craddock, p. 16) Sometimes when spiritual amnesia strikes us we lose our way and forget where we are going. It can happen when there are just too many demands upon us; we feel as if we are drowning. It can also happen when we forget who we are and lose touch with the ground beneath us; bored and restless we simply drift away.

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul writes to a community in danger of forgetting who they are. Paul is in prison in Rome. He does not know how his imprisonment will end. He does not know whether he will be set free or whether he will be put to death. From prison, he writes to the church in Philippi. It is the most tender and affectionate of all of his letters. Years before, he had established the church in Philippi as the first Christian church on European soil. Over the years the bonds of friendship remained strong. They supported him in his ministry. He does not know if he will see them again. He wants them to remember who they are, standing firm together in their faith and facing the future with confidence. He wants them to lead a life worthy of the gospel.

Paul begins his letter with a prayer of thanksgiving. Paul writes, “I thank my God every time I remember you... because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now.” He calls to mind their partnership in the gospel as a foundation for their life. We are

bound together as the people of God by remembering what God has done for us in Jesus Christ and by remembering our common experiences. Over the centuries, the Jewish faith and Jewish families have remained strong by telling and retelling their shared memories. Passover celebration begins with recounting the events of the exodus from slavery in Egypt. In the same way we remember and share the stories of the faith from generation to generation. If we do not know the stories of the faith, then we too are in danger of suffering from spiritual amnesia. When we celebrate the sacrament of baptism, a young child in the church presents the child being baptized with a Children's Bible to remind the family of the importance of reading the stories of the faith with their children, praying with their children and participating with their children in the life of the church. Every time we celebrate the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, we call to mind the words of Jesus, "Do this in remembrance of me." This memory of God's mighty deeds and the memories that we share as a particular community of faith keep us rooted and grounded in God.

Paul finds great joy in remembering their life together. Facing hardship and even death, Paul finds spiritual strength in the simple act of remembering their common faith and common life. In difficult times, it is easy to focus only on present troubles and forget everything else. A crisis can overwhelm our lives. Often it is a person's remembrance of past experiences, former joys and past struggles successfully managed that gives strength for the present time. Five years ago our nation was rocked by the events of 9/11. It was a moment of national amnesia. Who are we and what is happening to us? It was the memory of our traditions and core values that saw us through: the spirit of sacrifice in hard times, the love of freedom, courage in the face of danger and compassion for the sufferings of others. Memory can serve as an anchor through difficult times in the present. It is hard to get lost when you remember who you are and what God has done for you.

We find our true life not only through our memory, but also by how we live together today as followers of Jesus Christ. Even though Paul is separated by many miles from his beloved friends in Philippi, he writes to them about the life they are sharing together in the present. Paul and the Philippians are not only joined by what they have shared in the past, they "share in God's grace" together in the present. Their relationship is one of mutual love and mutual encouragement. The root of the word "share" that appears twice in this prayer is the word *koinonia* from which we get the word fellowship. The word fellowship has lost its punch. When we hear that the purpose of a gathering is to enjoy Christian fellowship, pictures of weak lemonade and store bought cookies dance in our heads. When Paul speaks of *koinonia*, he is not talking about taking a moment after worship for a casual chitchat, but a deeply shared common life in the power of the Spirit. Christian fellowship is about learning and worshipping together, opening our hearts to one another, being vulnerable and available to one another, and serving and working together in mission.

This is *Share the Spirit* Sunday. It is a day to experience a deeper appreciation for Christian fellowship. It is a day for us to explore the many ways in which we can be the body of Christ together. In the Community Room underneath the sanctuary there are people with information and displays about Christian fellowship. Christian fellowship is not about lemonade and donuts (although they are good too!), but about being partners in the gospel together.

We need one another in this shared life to help us see how to live a life that is worthy of the gospel. Paul was not ashamed of being a model of faithful living to help guide other Christians so that they do not lose their way. You cannot imagine how much your faithfulness, courage and kindness inspire me. Your sacrificial giving of resources and time encourage me to grow as a steward of God's gifts. Your capacity to forgive others, to welcome the stranger and to love those people who are the hardest to love, lead me to forgive, to welcome and to love. We are to be a community of mutual encouragement and inspiration.

Twenty-two years ago, when our son William was an infant, he rolled off of the bed and fractured his skull. I remember how we were sustained through that time by the messages of love and concern we received from our church family. A simple phone call saying, "You don't have to call me back, but I just wanted you to know that we are praying for William," had astonishing power. On another occasion, I remember visiting in the home of a member whose husband had died some weeks before. When I was with her, we saw the mail arrive through a slot in the door. Cards and notes spilled onto the floor. The lady said, "Look at the cards that have come today. It is those notes and prayers from friends who care that sustain me." We are not alone; we are partners together in the gospel of Christ.

Paul also wants the Philippians to look to the future. He prays that their "love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight." Paul wants them to be ready to face the persecution and the challenges that he knows from his own painful personal experience are coming their way. When the prophet Jeremiah faced opposition, betrayal and the scheming of his friends, he wondered if God had turned away from him. He wondered if he could count on God's help or if God was like a stream that suddenly flows with rainwater and then quickly dries up. Jeremiah wanted to get out of the prophet business. He did not think he had what it takes to face the future. God called Jeremiah to let go of his doubt and fear; God promised to make Jeremiah as strong as a bronze wall. The angry, violent mob could not prevail against him. In the same way, Christ will give the Philippians the strength to stand firm against their opponents. Paul tells them, "live your life in a manner that is worthy of the gospel of Christ." Only a life that is rooted in faith and grounded in a spiritual community with others is strong enough to face the challenges that lie ahead.

We let a lot of things get in the way of living the life we want to live; we let a lot of things distract us from the important things in life. Sometimes we lose a sense of who we are and where we are going. What matters most is living a life that is pleasing to Christ. Many years ago, a close family friend in another city spent countless hours helping a Hmong refugee family from Cambodia adjust to life in the United States. Before coming to this country, the family had no written language or skills for living in a modern urban city. This woman worked tirelessly to help the family build a meaningful life in a new culture. By her actions, she shared her faith in Christ. Ten years later, our friend developed liver cancer. When the father of the Hmong family learned about it, he called her on the phone. With a great heart but little medical knowledge he said, "Tell your doctor that I will give you half of my liver as you have given your very heart to me."

I do not know what difficulties you are facing in your life, what burdens you are carrying in your heart, or what challenges lie before you. As Ann Tyler pictures it: you may feel like you are lost somewhere out on Route One, drifting sideways or backwards, unsure what time or season it is. Yet, I know one thing: it is in remembering who we are and what God has done for us that we find true selves. It is in living together in the body of Christ, “striving together side by side,” that we learn how to live a worthy life. It is in Christ that we find the strength to face the future with hope and courage.