

Philippians 1:1-6
From Well Begun to Well Done
Rev. Jonathan P. Cornell
11/11/18

There stands at either end of history, two great poles. Like the pillars of the Golden Gate Bridge. On one is written: “In the beginning God...” And on the other, the glorious “day of Christ Jesus.” Like the two great pillars of the Golden Gate Bridge these two foundations provide the foundation, as well as the hope of our world. They are our beginning and our ending. But as I mentioned last week, we live between these two great poles. We move forward from a past we can never retrieve (the Garden), to a future we know only in part, and will not fully know until we are fully present in what Paul calls the day of Christ—when the Kingdom of God is revealed in its fullness. And what happens in between, as Caleb just read from Philippians 1, is what St. Paul calls *the good work* between well begun and well done.

Of all the letters Paul wrote along his Missionary Journeys throughout the Mediterranean, Philippians is often called his encouragement letter. Paul writes this letter to the Philippian Congregation. The Philippians were a well begun congregation. Paul planted this church with the help of a local businesswoman and benefactor, along with Philippian jailer. As he’s sitting in a Jail in Rome, this church sends one of its own, Epaphroditus, to care for Paul’s needs in jail. When he returns home to Philippi, Epaphroditus brings with him this encouragement letter.

We don’t get very far in life without the encouragement of others. Think of the coach, or the teacher, or the relative who spoke words—even perhaps challenging words—of encouragement over you. How much can the word of a person you respect and admire change the course of your life.

Listen to this expression of gratitude for the encouragement of one person in the life of another:

“The unpayable debt I owe to CS Lewis was not advice as it’s ordinarily understood, but sheer encouragement. He, for a long time, was my only audience. And only from him did I get the idea that my *stuff* could be anything more than a private hobby.”

The man who wrote this is the author JRR Tolkien, in a letter to his friend. And the “stuff” to which he refers was a book that he had written, but not yet finished, which was originally intended simply for the enjoyment of his children as they read each night before bed. That is, until CS Lewis got a hold of it and read it. The story that he’s talking about is the greatest adventure story ever written, The Lord of the Rings.

Imagine, if the sheer encouragement had not come from Lewis, what we would have missed out on.

To what end, then, is St Paul encouraging the Philippians, when he writes this letter to a Church that is well begun, but far from done? It’s the work of God in you. “He who began a good work in you...” Paul is absolutely insistent in encouraging the Philippian Church because he wants them to know that the God we worship, is the God who is a worker. The opening pages of the Bible depict God, who is at work in creation. And what Paul is saying to this church, and is saying to this church is that God’s work of creation, begun in the garden, is not yet complete among you. There is more

creativity yet to unfold. There is more life, there is more relationship, and responsibility yet to be worked out among you through the Holy Spirit. It is good news that you and I are works in progress.

The word St Paul uses here for work is the Greek word *Ergon* it has the connotation of work that is purposeful and productive. In Physics an erg is used to measure a unit of energy. So, the work that Paul describes that is taking place in the Philippians is measurable, it's concrete, it's observable.

The Spirit's work in your life is measurable. Just a few minutes ago Tim described for us an example of our God's measurable work in his life has played itself out. They're measured by our response. And for Tim, there was a time in which his **generosity was determined by reasonable administration of his resources, rather than faithful appropriation of God's gifts.** Is your response to God **determined by reasonable administration of your resources, or the joyful appropriation of God's blessings?**

The Scriptures teach us that all good gifts come from God's hand, and that we are to take the first 10% of what God gives us—the first fruits—and give it back to God in an expression of gratitude and trust for God's provision. Tim's faith increased and grew in measurable ways when he chose to say "God, you get what's first, not what's leftover."

But let's remember who the subject and the object of this verse is: He is God, and the one being worked on, is us. That is good to remember, because, as one commentator writes: "The human will blows hot and cold, is firm and unstable by fits and starts; it offers no security of tenure" (Motyer, 44). Our salvation is not determined by how much of God's work we allow him to conduct on us, but on God's gracious decision to work in us.

Deuteronomy 7:7-8 read: **It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the Lord loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.**

God has chosen to reveal his creative work in our lives. And as Paul writes in Ephesians 1:13, it is God who enables us to hear the word of truth, the gospel of our salvation, and to believe in him, and finally to be sealed with the Holy Spirit in our baptism. God's work in you, not your own working up to God, but God's choice, as John Calvin once said, to condescend to our level--thank goodness.

But, God's work in you doesn't just refer to you individually. In the Greek language in which Paul wrote this, the pronoun "you" is plural. We might read it this way: He who began a good work in *y'all*. So, this good work that God has begun is not only in you individually, but in you the community. And nothing is harder work than being in community. But Paul says, God has not left us on our own in community. The same Holy Spirit that was at work hovering over the void in Genesis 1:1 creating light from darkness, and form from chaos, that same Holy Spirit is at work in *y'all*.

Now there are some days when the Work God is doing in our community is abundantly clear, and there are other days when we wonder if there's anything at all that's good among us. But the work

God does among us as a body is shaping and formative, whether what is happening to us and in us is joyful, or whether it brings us pain. This is what being in community with one another is all about. When one part of the body rejoices, the whole rejoices. When one part of the body suffers the whole body suffers. As we continue to pray for our music director Rick; and as we pray for parents and spouses of our members who struggle in one way or another, it's not just a few who groan, but as we groan together—which is the Spirit expressing himself in prayer—the community is formed and shaped. Because Jesus, who formed and shaped us, is not done with us. In his book entitled *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer says that in every experience of Christian community there is an early and inevitable disillusionment that takes place. That's because Christian Community is not a human ideal, it is a divine reality. God chooses to form community in the midst of our hurt and our pain. It's God that chooses to do that, not us.

When Jesus was asked, Good “Teacher, what is the greatest commandment? he said: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

In seminary, one of my favorite teachers was a man named Darrell Guder, and Guder used to define neighbor as “the person with whom you must do” or in other words, it's the person who is standing right in front of you. When we are adopted into the family of God by the Cross of Calvary and the Grace poured out there, we get a radical new take on family.

In our lives we get to choose a lot for ourselves. We can choose our careers, and where we go to school, we can choose our friends, and we can choose our spouses, but we don't get to choose our family. And I want to challenge the notion that Church is also a matter of our choosing. Now of course you all had the choice as to which building you were going to attend. But I want to challenge the pernicious notion that plagues our Christian culture in America, which says: “that church wasn't the right fit for us because those people weren't the right fit for us.” Our Lord tells us: “you don't get to choose who you love and who you don't, because they're all family: Liberal/Conservative, Trump Supporter/Hillary Supporter, Black, White, Red, Yellow, Evangelical/Progressive, Christian Community, the body of Christ is not a human creation, it's a divine reality.

So, how do we grow in this divine reality? Because invariably there will come a time when we think to ourselves: doggonit, I don't like that person, but I don't have a choice, Jesus says I have to love them. Well we'll get to that in more detail next week when we finish out these verses.

But I think we begin by keeping the first things first: look to Jesus, love God and love your neighbor, and when we begin to think more of ourselves than we ought, be reminded that it was while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us—you and me. This is Christianity 101, and the reality is that we're never really that far from needing reminded of the basics.

Back when he used to write the back-page column for Sports Illustrated, Rick Reilly once wrote a piece on the Wizard of Westwood, the legendary coach John Wooden, and how he would begin the very first practice of the year with his first year players. For the first half hour of the first practice Coach Wooden would teach his players how to put on a sock the right way. “Wrinkles can lead to blisters” he would say. Most of his first-year players would cautiously roll their eyes at one another. They were the top recruits coming to the top program in the nation, and this old man was teaching them about socks? Finally, they would get it right. “Good” he'd say. “Now let's work on the other foot.”

Patient persistence, God's work in you that feels like we're in the process of going from one place to another, but we're not quite there. That's because "the day of Christ Jesus is not yet here." The second of those two great poles still stand out there before us. And so that means that God is not done with you yet. As you'll often hear people remark, if you're not dead, you're not done.

There is still work he has for us in community, and that is profoundly exciting!