

Role Model
Philippians 1:27-2:5
The Reverend Mary Kathleen Duncan
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²⁷Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, ²⁸and are in no way intimidated by your opponents. For them this is evidence of their destruction, but of your salvation. And this is God's doing. ²⁹For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well— ³⁰since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.

¹If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, ²make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ³Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. ⁴Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. ⁵Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.

The word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

For several years, I have had three scripture verses displayed in my office here at the church. They rest on top of my bookshelves, and I can see them from my desk. One of our former youth group members painted them for me, in colors that match the color scheme in my office. These verses have been the guiding verses of my ministry here at Westminster.

Recently, very recently in fact, I added a fourth verse painted by one our current youth. And it comes from today's passage from Paul's letter to the Philippians.

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.

For some reason, this verse grabbed ahold of me earlier this year and has not let me go since. I have been quoting it to my children at various times and in various circumstances.

As they go out the door to a friend's house,
When our new puppy needs to be taken out,
After they have a great play or assist on the field.

I've also used it here. A lot. We had an entire youth group lesson about it this spring, we studied it in Confirmation, it is engraved on the keychains our Confirmands will receive later in the service, and I'm preaching on it. Right now.

I find it to be an incredibly formative verse for myself, for my children, for the youth entrusted to my care, for every Christian. But what does it really mean, and why does it matter?

Let's take a moment and locate ourselves in this text. The apostle Paul is writing to the church in Philippi sometime between the years of 55-60 AD, roughly 25 years after the death of Jesus. The church in Philippi was founded by Paul around the year 50 AD and was the first church ever planted in Europe. Modern day Philippi is in Greece, near the border with Albania. So, Paul is writing to his friends, those he had baptized and nurtured in the Christian faith five to ten years after he first met them. And he writes this letter from prison.

Now, we aren't sure where he was in prison because Paul found himself in prison a lot for the sake of the gospel. It could have been in Ephesus, or Rome, or Caesarea. We do know that his student, Timothy, was with him and that the members of the Philippian church knew about his imprisonment and had sent him gifts to sustain him. The book of Philippians has been a favorite of Christians throughout the generations because of its relatable topics and its tone of warmth and friendship, founded in Christ.

But it also resonates because of where it originates – in prison. Think of all the other writings from prison that have influenced the faithful over the years – Martin Luther King, Jr., Nelson Mandela, Dietrich Bonhoeffer... There's something about a letter written under duress or written during hard times.

It strikes a chord. It speaks the plain truth. It says what really needs to be said. Scholar Dan Migliore says it best – "That Paul's Letter to the Philippians was written from prison augments the power of its message for Christians of every time and place."¹

I originally planned to preach only on Philippians 2:1-5, but I realized we would miss something by doing that. Because verse five is the culmination of the first part of this letter, and the hinge upon which the rest of it depends. And here's why it matters. One little word that begins verse 27. In our text, it is translated as only.

Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.

"Only" here refers to the Greek word *monon*. Only. Alone. One.

It is used a lot in the New Testament. Paul is saying to his beloved friends – "One thing. I just need you to know one thing. And that is to live your life in a manner worthy of the

¹ *Philippians and Philemon* by Daniel L. Migliore

gospel of Christ.” Paul tells the followers of Jesus that they need to know ONLY this ONE thing. But how, oh how, are we supposed to do that? What does it mean? What does it look like? What does it feel like? How will we know if we are doing this ONE thing the right way? Well, here’s where that hinge verse comes in so handy. We do this by having the same mind of Christ Jesus.

Here's another cool linguistic fact about this passage. All the “you’s” are plural. They’re “y’all’s,” or as Ben might say, “all y’all’s”. Now this is common in most New Testament epistles because they are letters addressed to churches, not individuals. Letters such as Philemon and 1 and 2 Timothy are exceptions. But I think we have the tendency to forget this.

We think that these words are just talking to us. Only. Alone. Individually.

If we were to translate verse 27 very literally, directly from the Greek, here’s what it would say, “One thing, conduct YOURSELVES worthily of the gospel.” There’s no question here if you is singular or plural. It’s clear. YOURSELVES. Y’all. All y’all. And the word here is a special word that’s only used twice in the entire New Testament. And both by Paul. And both purposefully. *Politeuomai*. Live your life/conduct yourself. But not just that. Live your life as a citizen. Conduct yourself as a citizen. Did you hear the “politic” of it all? In a secular letter, the writer might be exhorting the readers to be good soldiers and to pay their taxes. To serve the community and be good citizens who give back. But this is not a secular letter. So, this is not what Paul means. Paul means “be a good citizen in the kingdom of GOD.”

Not a good citizen of Rome. Or the emperor. Or the Hellenistic culture. Let the gospel be your goal. Let Jesus be your role model. Once more Dan Migliore hits the nail on the head – “Paul affirms that Christ Jesus is both Lord of all and the supreme role model for Christian life.”²

Jesus as our role model. Boy, I must have really hit this home in my confirmation lesson on January 21 because it showed up in many of your faith statements. And maybe, just maybe, this verse has grabbed ahold of y’all, too. But what does it mean for Jesus to be our role model? Is Jesus like LeBron? Or Zach Bryan? Or Taylor? Or Tiger? Or Simone? Should we want to wear the clothes that Jesus wears? Or buy the shoes that Jesus designed? Or spend our entire savings on a ticket to Jesus’ show?

Is he a role model like that? Someone whose style or swing or flips or athletic and artistic prowess we want to emulate?

Nope. Just like being a part of God’s kingdom is different than earthly citizenship, so is having Jesus as a role model. First, we don’t take our clues from culture, but from

² *Philippians and Philemon* by Daniel L. Migliore

gospel. And we don't exist only for ourselves, but others. And the goal of life is not some comfortable and set apart existence, but life lived with others, even if it means bearing their burdens and suffering alongside them.

I want to tell you the story of a man I believe tried to live as if Jesus was his role model. Russell Ewing was a television reporter from Chicago. He was born in 1923 and died in 2019 at the age of 95.

I first heard about him a few weeks ago while listening to the podcast, Criminal. In an episode from 2020 that re-aired February 16th of this year, host Phoebe Judge takes 30 minutes to tell the story of Russ' life. Russ was adopted at birth but orphaned by age 10 when his older parents and sibling died. He didn't want to leave his beloved Chicago, so was raised by neighbors. His first job was as a city fire fighter and then he found his way into investigative reporting. He was a staple on local news channels for years. Russ was a great guy, great colleague, great citizen of Chicago. But that's not why he became well-known. Russ became well-known because he helped many, many individuals surrender safely to the police. Here's what his obituary said about his impact on the world through this work –

“Deputized by the Cook County Sherriff...Ewing became known as an honest broker between criminal suspects and the police. More than 100 men (and one woman) turned themselves in to Russ who then accompanied them to police headquarters, making sure that they were not beaten or abused in custody. Calm, caring, and empathetic, he performed what was in many cases a life changing and life affirming service to the suspects and society.”³

The podcast tells a few of those 100 stories in its 30 minutes. They are profound. They tell of Russ' patience. His humility. The way he honored his fellow human beings. Instances where he put his own life in danger to keep others out of it. When I heard these stories, I knew. That guy has the same mind as Jesus.

You know, Russell Ewing's life was rich in experiences and love and community. But I don't think it was posh or easy or comfortable. Because he chose to follow Jesus. Christian faith was an important part of his life. It is evidenced in the order of worship from his funeral in 2019. His favorite verses from Colossians and Proverbs were read and proclaimed. And the song “It is Well” was sung at the end.

One of my professors from seminary, Charlie Cousar, delved more into the middle part of our passage today in some of his writings. The part that comes between the one thing and how we do the one thing. The part about struggling and suffering that is sometimes a part of the life of faith. Paul knew it. Remember, he was in prison when he wrote this. Russ knew it because he truly put others before himself. And I think, deep down, we

³ https://www.meaningfulfunerals.net/fh_live/14200/14253/media/ewing-russell-FINAL-FOR-PRINT4.pdf

know it, too. That a life lived like Jesus will be beautiful and full and blessed, but we won't escape the hard, the sad, or the uncomfortable. Dr. Cousar said these two things –

1. Paul writes about a form of suffering that one could avoid is one chooses to live a different style of life.
2. The gospel lived out in the midst of a world that cannot tolerate divine grace and the word of the cross inevitably evokes opposition.⁴

Suffering and struggle. These are never things anyone wants to do themselves. They are never things anyone wishes upon those they love. They are things we turn our eyes away from because it hurts too much.

Are you ready for one more Greek lesson? The word in verse 30 that is translated as “struggle” is the Greek word, *agon*. It refers to an athletic contest. Like a track meet. Or a game of baseball. Something embarked upon with others. Not an individual sport done in isolation. But a team sport, done together. That's the key to having the same mind as Christ. And to living worthily of his gospel. Doing it together. Not only. Not alone. Not for just yourself. But WITH and FOR others so we can figure it out TOGETHER.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, that great pastor and teacher from the early 20th century, that so many of those I've already quoted today looked up to and learned from sums it up in the most profound way – “The Church must not underestimate the importance of human example, which has its origin in the humanity of Jesus, and which is so important to the teachings of St. Paul. It is not abstract argument, but example that gives her word emphasis and power.”⁵

I believe Jesus is my role model. Your role model. Our role model. Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁴ *An Introduction to the New Testament: Witnesses to God's New Work* by Charles B. Cousar

⁵ *Letters and Papers from Prison* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer

