

“Follow Me”
Philippians 1:18b-26/John 15:12-17
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I. Introduction

I learned when to flip pancakes when I was 12. It was the opening day of “trout season,” and the men of our small Presbyterian Church in the mountains were hosting a pancake and sausage breakfast. My dad invited me to come along.

I thought I’d be setting tables and washing dishes.....but my dad had something else in mind; he asked me to “man a grill” and make pancakes. I was surprised, and pleased. I’d never really made pancakes before, so I watched him.....I followed what he did. Like my dad I warmed up the grill, and put some oil on it so the pancakes wouldn’t stick. Like him I sprinkled a little water on the grill to make sure it was hot, and watched the drops of water “dance.” And like him I scooped out about half a cup of batter per pancake, and quickly poured it on the grill. Together we waited for the pancakes to brown on one side.

When my dad flipped his pancakes I flipped mine, but I noticed a difference. His were perfectly brown, and mine were light brown, and maybe not quite done. I asked why there was a difference. He said that all grills were different, and you just had to wait until the pancakes were ready. I asked, “How do you know when the pancakes are ready to be flipped?” He then shared the secret of flipping pancakes: “Wait until the bubbles in the middle pop, and don’t fill in anymore. Then they are ready.” I tried it, and he was right. I made a lot of pancakes that day.....and still washed dishes.

Maybe that’s a small thing.....but not if you’re making pancakes. And I think of that every time I’ve made pancakes over the next 40 years; “wait until the bubbles pop and don’t fill in.” It still works. A truth passed on to me. I followed my dad.

In the text from John 15 we see that Jesus is with his disciples. They are away from the crowds and the demands of ministry. It is a quiet time, and we sense that Jesus is sharing something important. He looks around at these men who have followed him, and Jesus calls them “his friends.” Jesus looks into the eyes of his friends and says, “Love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than to give one’s life for a friend. I chose you to show you God’s way.....the way of love. Love one another.” (John 15:12-17) It still works.....it’s still the way of God. A great truth was passed on. Jesus would go on to show them, and they would follow that way.

II. Text

Paul is in prison. His life hangs in the balance of decisions made by Roman leaders. He writes to tell his friends in Philippi to not worry, he is fine. And Paul writes

because he knows they too face conflict and persecution for their faith. He writes to encourage them. He writes to tell them, "Follow me."

Read Philippians 1:18b-26.

III. Brief Exegesis

Paul writes to his friends to say, "My deliverance....my salvation...my release....is coming. My expectation and hope is that whatever the outcome, I will not shame Jesus Christ, but with boldness I will be faithful.....I will exalt Christ."

On the one hand, deliverance for Paul meant the possibility of death. In death he would be released from the struggles and anxieties of life and ministry. In death he would be free from prison, free from the abuse of pagans, and free from the betrayal and slander of other Christians. Paul looks through the mystery of death with absolute confidence that deliverance would mean meeting Jesus face to face. He is confident in the love and power of God to carry him from this life, to new life with the risen Christ.

On the other hand, Paul believed deliverance could also mean release from prison and continuing the ministry. Release would mean visiting his friends in Philippi. Release would mean the joy of seeing them grow in their faith. Release would mean new missions, new churches, new Christians, new travels.....new miracles as he shared about Jesus Christ.

Deliverance is "living for Christ".....sharing in ministry.....showing the way of God. And deliverance is also "dying for Christ".....peace after the struggle.....joy in new life.....being with the risen Christ. Paul doesn't know which he would choose. Both are good choices. Both are attractive for him. Both are deliverance.

In one sense Paul has no choice about what is about to happen. He sits in prison awaiting a decision made by others. His life hangs in the balance. But in another sense Paul is making an important choice. He is reframing the question. He is above his situation. Either way he is delivered. He walks into his own future free.....free of fear because he has great joy in ministry, and because even death has become a doorway to a new life with Christ. "For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain." (Phil. 1:21)

IV. Reflections

When I first read this text I had in mind the "all in," "fish or cut bait," raise our commitment level, type of sermon. I thought I heard the fiery half-time speech of the coach: "To live is Christ, and to die is gain!!" "Yaaa!!"

But as I began to work on this text, and listen to it, I heard something else. This is Paul speaking to his close friends. This is Paul speaking from his heart. This is a type of Shakespearian soliloquy; a thinking out loud.....a confidential sharing with close friends. He's not giving firm decisions. He's inviting his friends in Philippi along on a journey with him.....to join him in the process of thinking about faith and hope...about living and dying and living again. It is a high compliment Paul gives his friends; to invite them into his heart. This is not the commanding speech of a coach. Rather this is the bedside chat with a sick friend, or a one on one coffee with someone in a quiet corner.

And as I shared earlier, Paul writes to encourage his friends. He knows that they are worried about him. So he wants to put "their minds at ease." He is well, and either way before him is deliverance. He is at peace, and trusts God. His concern is to be faithful and bold for Christ. "It's win-win," he says. "To live is Christ, and to die is gain." "All is well."

But there's also more here. As Paul writes from prison, he knows his friends in Philippi also face conflict and persecution. He knows that Philippi is a "little Rome," with Roman laws, culture, religion and many retired Roman veterans. There is little tolerance for differing points of view.....differing ways of life.....differing beliefs. And the followers of Jesus in Philippi are different. Without directly saying so, Paul is quietly saying "I know your way is also hard. We've in this together. Follow me." As Jesus spoke to his friends to follow his way of love, so Paul speaks to his friends, "Follow me. Be bold for Christ. Be faithful. In life or in death, may Christ be exalted. Deliverance is either way.....it's win-win for you too. Follow me."

In a high-tech, 24/7/365 world of too many choices and too much information, we still need real people living lives for God who say "Follow me." We don't need "reality television shows." We need real followers of Jesus.

I didn't know when to flip a pancake and was looking for a place in ministry in our small church, and my dad said "follow me."

Jesus gathered a group of followers overlooked by most. He said, "I've chosen you to show the way of God.....the way of love. You are my friends. A friend will give it all for his or her friends. If you want to see what that looks like...."Follow me."

Paul writes to his friends in Philippi from prison. He knows their way is hard. He writes, "Be bold. It's deliverance either way. Follow me."

Today we commission our friends as missionaries to Mexico. They'll again be gone for a week and build a simple, concrete block home for a family in need. They'll cross the walls at the border, and the walls of culture. They'll share in God's mission in the world. "Follow me."

Next week we'll collect pledges to fill backpacks with food for hungry kids. It's for kids at our school.....Case Elementary.....and kids in our neighborhood.....Sharon. We need people to help for 1-2 hours on one Tuesday evening a month. We need generous contributions. We need people to pray. Do you want to live the Good Samaritan story for your kids, or your grandkids, or any kids watching you? Show them. "Follow me."

As a pastor I'm sometimes invited share in some of the most meaningful times of people's lives. I am thankful for the trust and love shown me. As a friend's journey here due to cancer was about done, he shared with me that he used to pray for healing. "Now," he said, "he prayed each day for enough strength and grace to make it through the challenges of the day." And in the weeks that followed, God granted that prayer. I will always remember that. As he approached his own "deliverance" with courage and hope there was a quiet trust that said "Follow me."

A couple weeks ago as I neared the celebration of my 20 years of ordination I got a surprise email from a college professor, Dr. Roger Mohrlang. Roger was a New Testament professor at Whitworth College when I was there. I hadn't heard from him in a number of years. He emailed to congratulate me. I emailed him back to say "thanks," and to say that I still use the Greek that I worked so hard to learn from him. And as I thought about it, I also said thanks for being a role model of someone who combined deep faith and academic rigor.....belief and knowledge. At that time, and still, that combination of believing and knowing is important to me. And Dr. Roger Mohrlang probably never knew.....in my own way I tried to follow him.

That's how it is often; we follow people, and people watch and follow us....and we never know. We are interpreting the Christian faith we profess we believe in how we live. People are watching. Some are following. And we watch and follow others.

Today you were given a smooth, glass gem. I would like you to put it in your pocket or in your purse, or somewhere you will see it and feel it frequently. I would like it to be a reminder that:

Jesus said, "Love one another. Follow me."

Paul said, "Live for Christ. Follow me."

And that we are to live in ways that invite people to "Follow me."