

“When the Dust Settles”
Philippians 1:1-11/Mark 1:32-39
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I. Introduction

This past Wednesday evening I participated in the Sharon High School Baccalaureate service at St. John’s Episcopal Church. It was a warm evening, and the sanctuary at St. John’s, like ours, is not air conditioned.

Before the service I spoke briefly with John Sarandrea, the Sharon Superintendent. We were talking about suits, robes and the warmth of evening when John mentioned that the air conditioning had been out at the Sharon School Administration Building for the last couple weeks. It was one of those ironic timing events in life; the heat and humidity go up, and the air conditioning goes out. John went on to share that they really hadn’t appreciated the air conditioning until it was gone, and will be delighted to have it back. When I came to my study on Thursday morning I had a new appreciation for my working air conditioner.

I think life often works like that; we don’t appreciate something until it’s gone. When the noise stops.....when the busyness slows down.....when the “dust of life settles” and we see things a little clearer.....we come to a greater sense of thanksgiving and appreciation for what has been the everyday “stuff” of our lives...like air conditioning. And like electricity when it’s been off for a day or two.....or a car when it’s been in the shop.....or a child who’s been away at college.....or a chocolate chip cookie when you’re on a diet. We start our summer worship schedule next Sunday. We’ll worship at 10AM in Fellowship Hall, where it’s air conditioned and more casual. A lot of people like that. And then we’ll return to worship here in the sanctuary in fall.....and once again become aware of the beauty and holy of this space.....to see it again, for the first time.

II. Scripture

As Paul writes a letter to his friends in Philippi, the “dust” of his life and ministry has settled a bit. He’s in prison. We’re not sure where. It could be Ephesus, or Rome, or Caesarea. But we do know he’s in prison because of his ministry. The “dust” has a way of settling when you’re in prison; there’s time to sit and think.....and pay attention to the everyday “stuff” of life that has come and gone.

And Paul writes to his friends in Philippi because they have collected money for him, and sent one member of the church to Paul with the money. In that day your jailers

did not supply any food for you. That was the responsibility of family or friends. Paul writes because he is deeply touched that the church in Philippi has gone out of its way to help their imprisoned friend.

Paul begins his letter: **(Read Philippians 1:1-11)**

III. Brief Exegesis

In prison Paul's life slows down, the "dust settles a little," he can see life and ministry a little clearer, and he sends a letter to his friends in Philippi. "Servants or slaves" he calls himself and Timothy. That may be some initial reference to being imprisoned, but the greater truth is his complete commitment to the Lord of his life, Jesus Christ. And "saints" he calls his friends, the church in Philippi. Again, on a surface level that may be a reference to their friendship and gift to him, but even deeper is their new status as followers of Christ and partners in ministry.

Typical of formal letters at that time, Paul then expresses his thanksgiving for them. Writing from prison Paul can see the great gift of their friendship. As he looks back he is thankful for their friendship, and their partnership in ministry (vv.3-6). He has many good memories with his friends in Philippi.

Paul goes on to say that he is thankful for the strong affection and love that has continued between himself and the Philippians (vv.7-8). Paul knows his affection for them, and they have shown their affection in their gifts, greetings and prayers for him while he's in prison. We can hear faint echoes of Jesus' story of the "sheep and the goats" in Matthew 25: "I was in prison and you visited me" (Mt. 25:36).

Finally, Paul's thanksgiving looks to the future. He prays for his friends that they will continue to grow in love, so that at the end of days when Christ returns they will be found faithful in all things (vv. 9-11). And again we hear the faint echo of Jesus' parable of the "Talents" in Matthew 25, when at the end of time the faithful hear the Master's blessing: "Well done good and trustworthy servant" (Mt. 25:21,23). That is Paul's hope for the church in Philippi. As the "dust settles" and Paul does without many things in prison, he clearly sees the support of his friends in his life and ministry, and so as he begins his letter he says "thanks."

IV. Reflections

I am not in prison. But after 20 years of ordained ministry the occasion has given me an opportunity to let "the dust settle" a little this week, and like Paul, give thanks. And on this day when we dedicate our VBS staff, and ordain and install church officers, a brief word about Christian ministry seems appropriate.

Like Paul, I look back and see a partnership with many people and churches over the years. People like my parents, wife Jeanne, various pastors and professors throughout the years, friends, and members of churches. Churches include the little Northport Presbyterian Church where I grew up, Bell Memorial Presbyterian Church where I learned much, and 1st Presbyterian Church of Sharon where I have matured. I use the term “partnership” with people and churches intentionally. Years ago I read Eugene Peterson’s book, Under the Unpredictable Plant, and in that book he discusses this partnership of pastor and people. I have always remembered what he said. Peterson says that on one hand, as we expect, God uses the pastor to shape and lead a congregation. But on the other hand, what we might not expect, God uses a congregation to shape and help a pastor grow and mature (pp. 18-22). It’s a “two way street of God’s grace.” I will say it’s not always easy, but I challenge myself (and colleagues in ministry who will listen) to ask; “What is God teaching me through these people I’m called to love and serve.....these people who by the grace of God are called a church?” It is a partnership; pastor and people. I have learned much. Like Paul, I am thankful.

And if I think of the present and our ministry together, I am reminded of a story that comes from professor, preacher and writer, Fred Craddock:

“To give my life for Christ appears glorious. To pour myself out for others....to pay the ultimate price of giving everything I am in one great act of faithfulness.....I’ll do it. I’m ready, Lord, to go out in a blaze of glory.

“We think giving our all to the Lord is like taking a \$1000 bill and laying it on the table.....’Here’s my life, Lord. I’m giving it all.’

“But the reality for most of us is that the Lord sends us to the bank and has us cash in the \$1000 bill for quarters. We go through life putting out 25 cents here and 50 cents there. Listen to the neighbor kid’s troubles instead of saying “Get lost.” Go to a committee meeting. Give a cup of cold water to a shaky old man in a nursing home. Forgive a hurt, again.

“Usually giving our life to Christ isn’t glorious. It’s done in all those little acts of love, 25 cents at a time. It would be easy to go out in a flash of glory; it’s harder to live the Christian life little by little over the long haul.” (Illustrations for Preaching, p. 200)

In this day that is the ministry we share together. Sometimes I get swept away by big ideas and visions. I am thankful when you remind me “it’s all about quarters.”

And like Paul, if I think much about the future and ministry, church, and 1st Presbyterian Church, my hope and prayer is that you grow in love, so that at the end of days you will hear, “Well done good and faithful servants.” Beyond that I’m not sure of much. I have some ideas about the future, and I think I see some trends. But most of

all I want to be open to the surprising activity of God, and pay attention to see things I may have never thought about.

This past spring I read Tony Horowitz's book, A Voyage Long and Strange. It's an interesting history of the explorers who came to North America before the Pilgrims. In a haunting section on Christopher Columbus Horowitz tells the story of a man overwhelmed with mysticism, dreams of the Orient, stories of rivers of gold, and fantasies that the Americas were somehow really the Orient. Horowitz writes:

"Columbus never grasped the immensity of what he'd done. The more he saw, the less he learned. He went to his deathbed still convinced he'd reached the Orient. In the space of just twelve years, Columbus had introduced Europe to a hemisphere that held 28 percent of the world's landmass and millions of unknown people. But the Admiral found only what he'd gone looking for in his mind in the first place. He believed he found the Orient. He never knew he discovered America." (pp.112-3)

I find that haunting and sad; "The more he saw, the less he learned. He never knew he discovered America." It happens, though, doesn't it? It happens when we think we have the answers, and miss the real truth.....when we limit the future to our own small visions of what we think is possible, and miss the great activity of God all around us. I don't know what the future for First Church or ministry or me will hold. But I don't want it to be said of me, "The more he saw, the less he learned." And I'm glad to have friends along for "this voyage long and strange." Who knows what we might see, learn and discover together.

V. Conclusion

We hear in our passage from Mark 1:32-39 that as Jesus begins his ministry there's a flurry of activity; preaching, healing, miracles, casting out demons. The crowds are growing. The needs are great. In the stillness of the early morning Jesus gets up to pray. The dust of ministry is settling a little at that hour. He again sees the ministry before him, and gives thanks.

Paul sits in a prison. The busyness of his ministry and travels have quieted. The dust settles a little there. He sees his ministry and life, and writes to his friends in Philippi to say "thanks."

Twenty years of ordained ministry. There's always a long list of "to do's," and by the grace of God enough energy to get them done. But today there is a quietness. The dust of ministry has settled a little. I see a little, and give thanks. Amen.