

22 years ago when I graduated from seminary, I hit the ground running. I was full of excitement, full of all the answers. I was unaware of how much I didn't know about parish ministry. So I had my surprises during my early years of ministry.

One of those surprises was a pastoral one. I learned that there are some people who want to die. Fresh out of seminary, I found myself trying to minister to parishioners who had given up on life, and who really wanted to die.

Now I have to make a couple of distinctions. These people were not suicidal. They wouldn't ever think of taking their own lives. They would never even think of asking someone to assist them. In 1995 small town west Texas that was pretty much off of the radar screen. They just wanted God to take them. They wanted God to end their lives naturally, the sooner the better.

Also, these were not people who were dying and had resigned themselves to their fate. These were not people with terminal diseases who had reached a place of acceptance. I've ministered to people like that, people who have lived a good life, who have struggled, and for whom death becomes a welcome friend. The death of such a person of faith who has reached such a place of acceptance is often one of the holiest things that I'm privileged to witness.

No, this was something different. These people just wanted to die. Actually, it wasn't so much about wanting to die as it was about giving up on life. They were tired of life. They had little hope. They could discern no purpose for their lives. They were depressed, and they were just hoping that God would put them out of their misery soon. They were tired of living because they felt they had nothing to live for.

One of them was a WWII vet. He had volunteered and fought in the Pacific. When he was younger he had things that he was clearly willing to die for. But now that he was older, he felt that he had nothing to live for.

Where is the good news for such people? Where is the good news for us when we're tired, depressed, or without hope?

This morning, for an answer, I want to take a look at our Epistle reading from Philippians ch1. This is the famous place in the Epistles where Paul says that he wants to die.

Why does Paul want to die? Is he tired? Is he suicidal? Is he stoically accepting of the inevitability of death? The answer to that question, and Paul's reasons for his attitude, are helpful for us.

First of all, the setting. Paul is writing this letter during one of his periods of imprisonment. Could be any one of the half dozen times he was jailed for extended periods. And during those times, the specter of a capital sentence was always there. Paul escaped being executed many times until he was finally beheaded after his second imprisonment in Rome. So Paul is sitting somewhere in jail writing to the church in Philippi. And the headsman's ax is a real possibility for him.

And yet, Paul sees his imprisonment as an opportunity to spread the gospel. He gets to be an influence and example for his guards.

And he seems remarkably upbeat. In the verses right before our Epistle lesson he says, "I will continue to rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, this will turn out for my deliverance."<sup>1</sup>

He is confident that he will be delivered from prison. Does that mean he that he thinks he's going to get out? Does he have some sort of high powered defense attorney, some Johnny Cochran of the first century? No. Execution is still a possibility. Paul says that his hope is that he will be faithful to the gospel, to continue to speak with boldness. In the last verse before our Epistle lesson begins he says, "Christ will be exalted now as always in my body, whether by life or by death."<sup>2</sup>

In other words, 'I may be executed. I may be stuck in prison. I may be set free. But no matter what, I want Jesus to be exalted, by my life, or by my death.'

Why does Paul have this attitude? He tells us in our epistle lesson:  
"For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain."<sup>3</sup> He's saying, life or death, it's a win/win situation.

"If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me."<sup>4</sup> He knows that he could be out doing God's work. That's a great thing.

Or, he knows that he could die, and be with Christ. There's nothing better than spending eternity with Jesus.

But Paul also firmly believes he has work to do. He says, "(For me) to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you."<sup>5</sup> In other words, 'I still have spiritual miles to travel with you. I still have ministry to do with you. God has a purpose for me, and I don't think my earthly work is finished yet.'

And so he says, "Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith."<sup>6</sup>

Paul might have liked the words of Robert Frost: "The woods are lovely, dark, and deep / But I have promises to keep / And miles to go before I sleep / And miles to go before I sleep."

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<sup>1</sup> Phil 1:18-19

<sup>2</sup> Phil 1:20

<sup>3</sup> Phil 1:21

<sup>4</sup> Phil 1:22

<sup>5</sup> Phil 1:24

<sup>6</sup> Phil 1:25

Was Paul suicidal? No. He had many ways he could have hastened his death, but he didn't take them.

Was Paul tired of life? Was he ready to give up? No. He still had a sense of purpose. He felt that God still had a job for him to do.

Was Paul accepting of the inevitability of death? Yes. But, although he would have liked to be with Christ immediately, he suspected that God wasn't finished with him yet.

Yes, Paul was ready for death. But he was also ready to continue living and doing God's work in the world.

And of course, the next question is, "That's great for Paul, but what about us?"

Are there going to be times in life when we're tired, or depressed, or without hope? Yes. Are there going to be times when some of us are so tired, or so bored, or feel so useless that we want to die? Again the answer is yes.

And it is at such times that it is essential to remember Paul's example. He was ready to die to exalt God. But he was also ready to continue to live and minister and exalt God.

Continuing to live is not always the easiest thing to do. I know, as I get older, that I can't do everything I used to be able to do. And I know that as I talk to our older members, our shut ins, that at times there can be an enormous frustration with being able to do less and less.

But at all ages, and at all levels of ability, there are ways to continue to minister to others. Even if circumstances leave you homebound, you might still be able to pick up the phone and call someone. You could still pray for someone. And even if you're bedridden, you can still minister to those who care for you. I've known people who do that, and it is a powerful ministry indeed.

That's one of the things that most impressed me a decade ago with the way Pope John Paul II approached his death. Yes, he and I would have doubtless disagreed about many issues. There are a number of reasons that I'm not a Roman Catholic priest. But I was so impressed with how, over the last few years of his life, John Paul continued to serve and minister, even as his physical powers were waning. He provided a strong example to all of us.

It's ultimately a matter of our stewardship. I know this is a strange stewardship sermon. But it is about the stewardship of our lives. God has placed us here. God has given us the gift of life. And God calls us to use that gift. We are called to love and worship God, and we are called to love and serve others.

When Jesus summarizes our duties to God and to each other, it's no accident that he says, 'First, love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. Second, love your neighbor as yourself.'

This is about our purpose. This is about our stewardship of the lives that God has given us.

Paul had his priorities straight. He wanted to glorify God with his life. If that meant dying and being a martyr, so be it. If that meant continuing to live and minister to others, so be it.

What kind of priorities do you have? How will you live into God's purpose for you?

God has given you the gift of life. Will you be fruitful? Will you be faithful? In your life, what comes first?

Loving God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength.  
Loving your neighbor as yourself.

That's something to die for.  
That's something to live for.