**Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost**

**September 20, 2020**

**Text—Philippians 1:12-14, 19-30**

**Healthy Churches Proclaim the Gospel**

My dear Trinity friends, as you all know by now, we are experiencing a time of transition in our pastoral leadership. In such times as these, it is helpful for us to slow down, take a deep breath, and take stock of who we are as a church and who God wants us to be. And when we do that, when we look at ourselves and how we’ve been doing in the last decade or so, I think we’ll find that we’ve been doing pretty well as a congregation. We’ve experienced peace and unity for a long time now, we’ve had some modest growth in membership, and we’ve remained steadfast in our confession of faith. We’re certainly not “perfect” in any sense, but we’re a good church, a healthy church. And that’s why, when I was looking ahead at our lectionary readings, I was very pleased to see that our epistle texts for the next several weeks come from Paul’s letter to the Philippian church. Most of Paul’s epistles were written to struggling churches that were having problems of some kind, but that doesn’t seem to be the case with the book of Philippians. Rather, Paul praises the Philippian church for its unity and faithfulness to the Gospel. He praises it for being a healthy church. So of all of Paul’s letters, I think that this one has the most to say to us in our situation right now. It tells us, a healthy church, how to keep being healthy.

So in some ways, this sermon series on Philippians is a review for us. It is going to encourage us to keep doing many of the things we’re already doing. It will not give us a comprehensive list of *everything* we need to do, but it will hit many of the most important highlights. If you’d like to know more, I’d encourage you to come to my Sunday morning Bible class, where we’ll be discussing issues of church and ministry in greater depth. For now, though, in this sermon we’re going to focus on a habit of healthy churches that is revealed to us in this morning’s epistle text. Though it may seem obvious to many of us, today we’re going to focus on how healthy churches proclaim the Gospel.

A little bit of context will be helpful here. Paul wrote this letter to the Philippians when he was in prison. He had been put there because he refused to stop proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The Romans thought that he was a menace to society, so they locked him up. But they were not able to keep him quiet. Paul continued to preach the Gospel by writing letters to churches all over the empire, many of which made their way into the New Testament. One of those prison letters was to the church in Philippi, and you can tell by reading it that Paul is indeed writing from captivity. He starts off our text by saying that his imprisonment has actually served to advance the Gospel, because the whole imperial guard had come to know that he was an apostle of Christ. Some of them had perhaps become Christians as a result of Paul’s witness. And many other Christians could see how courageous Paul was in suffering for his faith, and they themselves were also encouraged to speak the Gospel boldly. They saw how he did so without regard for the consequences, and they were inspired to do the same.

So then Paul, at the end of our text, encourages his readers to follow his example and the examples of those others who were inspired by him. He encourages the Christians at Philippi to show the same boldness in their proclamation of Jesus Christ. They were to tell others about Jesus and his death and resurrection for their salvation. They were to proclaim that Jesus would be returning again on the last day, and that all who trusted in him would at that time be raised from the dead and receive eternal life in God’s kingdom. And as they did this, they were not to be frightened by those who would oppose them. In the Roman Empire at that time, there were many different factions that hated Christians and wanted to imprison or kill them. The church in many places was forced to conduct their services and other operations in secret. But even though those earliest Christians were careful, they were not called to be fearful. On the contrary, they refused to stop worshiping Jesus Christ and proclaiming his name to their neighbors. They would not compromise with their surrounding pagan culture in the least, even when it meant that they would suffer for it. They could do this because they knew that they spoke the truth, and that suffering for proclaiming the truth was better than accepting lies to be comfortable. They knew that in the end, when Jesus returned, their faith in him would be vindicated.

So what does all this have to say to us as Christians in twenty-first century America, here in Springfield, Missouri? Well, it says to us the same thing that it said to the first century Philippian church: that we should proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ in our community as well. Springfield is known for being a very Bible-belty town: we have many large churches here, a large Pentecostal university and a couple of Bible colleges, and the denominational headquarters of the Assemblies of God. If there’s any decent sized city in the US that doesn’t appear to need a whole lot of evangelism, it would probably be Springfield, Missouri. But even though Springfield is a pretty Christian town, there are plenty of people here who are not Christian. According to one set of statistics I found, only about half of the people in the Springfield metropolitan area are affiliated with a Christian church. And many of those people probably don’t attend services regularly, if at all. And Springfield is supposedly one of the most religious cities in the US! We’ve really got our work cut out for us, don’t we? There are many thousands of people in this area who either don’t know Jesus at all or have fallen away from the faith. And we, as a healthy church, are in a wonderful position to reach out to them. We reach out by serving people’s physical needs with our time and resources. We reach out by inviting them to our campus for community events. And most importantly, we reach out by proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ to them. We as a church have so many things we can offer to the people of our town. We want them to have what we have, to experience the joy of knowing Jesus Christ and being a part of this loving and supportive community we have here at Trinity. Imagine all of these seats in our congregation, completely full for two services on Sunday mornings. That’s what we want to see: we want to see people coming here to receive God’s gifts for them in Word and Sacrament, believing in Jesus Christ and being saved through that faith. Our healthy church is well positioned to offer these blessings to our community. We only need to reach out with them.

But reaching out sometimes carries a price. It’s not always easy to proclaim the Gospel. It certainly wasn’t for Paul and his fellow early Christians. They were imprisoned, tortured, and executed for their faith, and many more Christians since then have met the same end. It is unlikely that anything quite like that would ever happen to us American Christians today, but the potential for suffering for the faith is here. No, there aren’t any secret police who will take us away if we hold divine services. No, there aren’t any gulags where devout Christians are sent. But are there consequences for proclaiming the Gospel in our society today? You bet there are. Social media mobs find people who dissent from progressive orthodoxy and attack them. Companies pressure their employees to declare themselves LGBT “allies,” and sometimes will penalize those who refuse. Many in this country would say that it’s hateful or bigoted to claim that salvation can be found in Jesus Christ alone. To proclaim the Gospel in a biblically faithful way is to invite mockery and abuse from many elements of our society. In the face of that, the temptation for us would be to compromise on our moral stances and to keep our faith to ourselves. It’s a lot easier to go along to get along, isn’t it? Why publicly confess Jesus as Lord when you can either renounce or privatize your faith to avoid the suffering that often comes with it?

But as a healthy church, we know that’s something that we can never do. As a community that has experienced the grace and salvation of Jesus Christ, we know that we could never stay quiet about the wonderful things we have seen and heard. Like Paul and the Philippian church, we will boldly proclaim Jesus even in the face of hostility and opposition. We will be willing to suffer consequences for remaining true to our faith. As we promised in our confirmation vows, we will be willing to suffer all, even death, rather than fall away. We will, as Paul says in our text, strive side by side for the faith of the Gospel, and we will not be frightened in anything by our opponents. According to Paul, suffering for the sake of Jesus’ name is actually a sign of our salvation, because people who compromise typically don’t suffer at the hands of the unbelieving world. Knowing this, we will speak the Gospel to everyone in truth and love, and God will use our proclamation of his Word to bring some of them to faith. Trinity Lutheran Church will be known as a congregation that remains steadfast in its confession of faith in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. Some people may not like us for that very reason, but we are not called to be liked by the world. Instead, we are called to be faithful and true to our confession, and by God’s grace, we will be.

In the end, I personally think that one of the main reasons Trinity has been so healthy over the years is that we have been a church that has not been swayed by the world’s pressure to conform. We haven’t compromised on what God’s Word teaches us, and we have remained faithful to the truth. What we need to do now, especially in these uncertain times, is to stay the course: to not allow ourselves to be tempted by false teachings or bullied into accepting them by the world. What we also need to do, and maybe do a little better than we have been, is reach out to our community with this Gospel message of salvation in Jesus Christ. These are the most important tasks of the church: to remain steadfast in the truth of the Gospel and proclaim it to those who do not yet believe it. That’s really what makes for a healthy church. We can have the most beautiful sanctuary, the best fellowship and youth programs, and the fattest bank account, but if we don’t have the Gospel at the center of everything we do, we cannot be considered a healthy church. We may appear to be healthy and strong on the outside, but we will be sickly and weak on the inside, and we will fold under the slightest pressure. Thus, proclaiming the Gospel faithfully must be our highest priority as a congregation. We do this not only because God wants us to, but also because we know that it is only by this Gospel that anyone on this earth will be saved. Only the Gospel of Jesus Christ can forgive sins, and only the Gospel of Jesus Christ can give the promise of eternal life. We know the joy of believing this Gospel, and we want all people in the world to know that joy as well. So let us continue to be known as a church that is faithful to the Gospel and does not hesitate to proclaim it. By so doing, we will remain strong in the faith ourselves and bring many others to faith along with us. Amen.