

Mahatma Gandhi was a spiritual leader in India who helped India through the transition from British Rule to independence in the first part of the 20th century. He is said to have said, "Be the change you want to see in the world." Gandhi studied many world religions and in fact, found much to admire in Jesus Christ. As he worked for justice, he united people to effect change through non-violent means, as they worked together to be the change they wanted to see in the world.

As I read the research on Philippians for this sermon, it struck me that basically, Paul is encouraging the Christians in Philippi and us here today, to be the Christian we want to see in the world. He writes, "live your life in a manner worthy of the Gospel of Christ." What is the Gospel of Christ? To love one another as he has loved us; to love God and love our neighbors as ourselves; to die to self and live for Christ, as Paul writes the people of Philippi. To suffer with and for Christ, die and rise with Christ, just as Paul has preached and taught, and was beaten and imprisoned, all for love of Christ and sharing Jesus' Gospel. We are called to love Christ and others more than life itself even. We can do this because Jesus showed us by his life, death and resurrection, that God's love in us is everlasting.

To live our lives in a manner worthy of the Gospel of Christ is to live like Christ, with the integrity of God's love, so that in all of our talking and walking, we place our feet in the footsteps Christ left us, so that we are loving one another not just in words, but by our every deed.

This says to me 3 things, for how we can live our faith in these pandemic days:

- 1) It's time for us to **stop wallowing and whining**. We are living in a pandemic, and it is going to take some time to live through it. Too many are dying in it; we need to stop being observers of disaster and death, and start being participants in healing and resurrection. By now, we all know people, family and friends, who have been touched by disaster and death; so how are we helping with healing and recovery? How are we offering new life, in the midst of others' grinding suffering?

Paul reminds us in these verses, and in his whole letter, that he REJOICES in his suffering in prison, because God is with him, and is using his suffering and disastrous situation, to bring love and hope and the Gospel to life – in the guards Paul is bringing to faith by his witness, in others who are preaching in the city now that he is jailed, in others who know him and who are praying for him, and as he prays for them. We know, as Christians, believers in Christ, that 1) God is with us in our suffering, and 2) God gets us through our suffering to new life on the other side. As we say during communion, Christ died, Christ is Risen, Christ will come again. It's time to put feet on our faith, and act in ways that demonstrate that we believe our words. Like our Church in Society and Mission folks invited us to step out in faith this past weekend and contribute to the food pantry, to meet the rising need of families in our area. Let us give from our surplus, so that others can simply live! Let us BE the Christians we want to see in the world, and stop wallowing and whining!

2) It's time for us to change our perspective **from "me" to "we"**. This pandemic is a great leveler, where all can be carrying the disease without even knowing, and all can be infected, and any can die... The pandemic can cause us to cringe in fear, and hide away in our homes to avoid being infected by any of a host of unknowing carriers! So when we must go out, we wear masks because any of us could be carriers, and we don't want to be infected or to infect others. However, we can also be out doing a great deal of good, if we help others with our masks on, keep a safe distance and wash our hands often. We can change our perspective from 'me to we'! So, because the disease affects some of us disproportionately, we might begin by helping folks from these 3 demographics:

-- Those who are more at risk of illness and death because of age or complicating medical conditions.

-- Those who must work in public spaces in order to have a paycheck for their families— this is why many people of color, who are in low paying service jobs as essential workers, are contracting and dying of the disease more than folks working white collar jobs. If they want a paycheck for their family, they need to keep working in that factory or restaurant or hospital...

--Those who are at risk of hunger or eviction, because their job or business was ended by the pandemic closures. They have now run out of government help to meet rent, and buy food. We who believe in Jesus, in the kingdom, in God's power to bring resurrection out of every death, are called now, to put deeds behind our words of faith, to do something to help care for these who are living (and dying) in more risk than we ourselves.

As we are launching our neighborhood care groups, we can look at our UMCG neighbors first, to see if any in our group might need some extra help with shopping (if they are at risk), or with care of children (so they can work) or with groceries or rent help (so they are not hungry or evicted). If all UMCG folks are safe, do we know of others in our neighborhood who are in need? Any who have lost work, or lost a business? Any who need an extra hand with children or errands?

We can be the Christians we want to see in the world, who are helping others, proving that LOVE WINS, and there is LIFE after death, hope in the midst of suffering, and joy inside our tears. It's not really about me, it's about we – for if all die but me, what is there to live for? Jesus came to teach us that life is really about we – God's love for us is to bring us all into family with and for each other (God's kingdom, or reign, or kin-dom). It's about raising our whole communities to become networks of help and hope, and abundant life for all. It's time to move from me, to we. We the people of Christ, live life to love others, as God and Christ love us.

Which leads us right into our third point of the sermon:

3) It's time for us to **live like Christ** who **lives to give**, not lives to gain. Jesus lived to love others, in all he said and did, from listening to children and women, to healing the sick, to teaching the poor, to raising the dead. He lived to love. And, even in his suffering, he focused on others: "woman, here is your son.... To the thief: today you will be with me in paradise...father, forgive them for they know not what they do...." In our grief and suffering even, we can be like Christ, who moves beyond himself, to care for those around him.

In the book and in the movie, "Just Mercy," author and lawyer Bryan Stevenson tells of learning how 'each of us is more than the worst thing we've ever done.' As he takes up his calling to represent the poor on death row, he represents teens, women, the mentally disabled, and men some of whom have committed terrible crimes, but who each are struggling to recover and find redemption. Stevenson writes, "My work with the poor and incarcerated has persuaded me that the opposite of poverty is not wealth, the opposite of poverty is justice." He maintains that the true measure of our character as individuals and as a society is in how we treat the poor, the disfavored, the accused, the incarcerated and the condemned. He writes, "We are all implicated when we allow other people to be mistreated. An absence of compassion can corrupt the decency of a community, a state, a nation. Fear and anger can make us vindictive and abusive, unjust and unfair, until we all suffer from the absence of mercy and we condemn ourselves as much as we victimize others...I believe it's necessary to recognize that we all need mercy, we all need justice, and we all need some measure of unmerited grace."

Mercy, justice and grace were all part of Jesus' words and actions every day, in his teaching, and in his ministry. We too, if we can live like Jesus, are to **live to give** mercy, justice and grace to those around us, even when we are suffering. Like Jesus, we know that God's love wins, and Those in deepest need are all around us now, folks: in Geneva, Chicago, California, Alabama, Yemen, Myanmar, and beyond.

How will we **live to give**, even as we and others are suffering? Let us live, and give, like Christ!

So there you have it:

Let us be the Christian we want to see in the world:

As we: 1) stop our wallowing

2) move from me to we

3) and live to give, like Jesus Christ.

John Wesley and his congregations said this covenant prayer together as they closed their New Year's Eve worship each year;

"I am no longer my own, but thine, O Lord. Put me to what you will, rank me with whom you will, put me to doing, put me to suffering, let me be employed for you or laid aside for you, exalted for you or brought low for you; let me be full, let me be empty; let me have all things, let me have nothing. I freely and heartily yield all things to your pleasure and disposal. And now, O glorious and blessed God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, you are mine, and I am yours. So be it. And the covenant which I have made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven. Amen."

How are we to live in a manner worthy of the Gospel? We can start by following Jesus more nearly, loving him and our neighbor more dearly, and seeing Christ's kingdom possibilities and work around us more clearly, as we live and serve with Christ day by day. Let us choose to BE the Christian we want to see in the world, living our lives in a manner worthy of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Amen!