

Spiritual Friendship

Essay 10 in the series “Ode to Joy”

Halfway through Paul’s letter to the Philippians, we come to a very personal section in Philippians 2:19-30. And at first it seems mundane, perhaps not of much importance. Paul hopes to send his most reliable companion Timothy to Philippi. As soon as he sees how things are going – will he be acquitted or not? – he’ll send Timothy. He’s even confident that he himself will come to Philippi. But first he’s sending Epaphroditus back to Philippi. The Philippian church had sent Epaphroditus to Rome to take care of Paul while he was under arrest. But Epaphroditus had taken ill; in fact, he had almost died. He survived, however, and now Paul is sending him back to Philippi urging the saints there to welcome him home with joy and honor.

O.K., next text! But no, there are things, important things about this passage. Let’s look at four of them.

The first one is how personal it all is. These New Testament documents, especially the letters, are all about people, real-life people. That would seem obvious, but somehow many readers miss this. For several centuries, the Bible has been used primarily to find prooftexts for doctrine and practice, and the people in it remain pretty much stick figures (with no real humanity), and for this reason, it’s little wonder that our lives don’t replicate theirs. And maybe the people in our lives remain stick figures at least for us because the people in Scripture do.

Under the influence of rabbinic Judaism, Hellenistic philosophy, Roman law (later church canon law) and in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the Enlightenment with its passion for definition and categorization, we have been led to think that books like Philippians are all about doctrine and practice, but they’re all about people. From the origin of our faith, it’s all been about people. If we go back to what Jesus taught, we find repeated emphasis not on what passes for “doctrine” today but on mastering our anger, serving others, loving others, forgiving others, trusting God, restraining our knee-jerk impulses to judge. These are all people skills. It’s primarily about people, about how people treat people. Christian faith is always for people about people. And a text like this one reminds us of that.

The second thing we notice about this text is Paul’s graciousness about Epaphroditus. The Philippians had intended him to stay in Rome with Paul to be his personal servant and attendant which took courage on the part of Epaphroditus. He could easily have been caught up in the charges against Paul. But he’d become ill and had almost died. And now Paul realizes that it’s time to send Epaphroditus back home, in all probability, with this Philippian letter. The problem though is this: Will Epaphroditus be seen by some as a quitter? And so Paul takes great pains to describe Epaphroditus as his brother, his fellow-worker, and his fellow-soldier. He goes on to call Epaphroditus the Philippians’ “messenger” using as the word for messenger “apostolos,” ranking Epaphroditus with the most spiritually elite. Paul then urges the Philippians to welcome him home in the Lord

with great joy, to honor such a person, for he has risked his life for the work of Christ. Now what is so touching here is that Paul himself in the valley of the shadow of death, in prison awaiting trial before Caesar, thinks of Epaphroditus. He was not – as we too often tend to be – so caught up in his own trouble that he could not pay attention to the troubles of others.

And then (this is our third observation), there's what Paul says about Timothy – that he has no one like him, one that's like a son to him. And it's true. You read the letters of Paul – their salutations and their final greetings – and you see Timothy is almost always there with Paul, except perhaps when he's off on a mission for Paul. Well, great! But see now what Paul is really saying about Timothy in the context of the Philippian letter – that Timothy takes a genuine interest in the welfare of others, not just his own welfare but the welfare of others. Almost everyone, Paul says, looks out for his own interests not those of Jesus Christ. But not Timothy. Timothy is one who stands firm, who does nothing out of selfish ambition or for his own empty glory. He's the one who in humility considers others better. He's the one who looks not to his own interests, but the interests of others. Which is the point Paul makes over and over again.

Which brings us to our fourth and final point – the importance of spiritual friendship. It's important to have spiritual friends, not just people to hang out with, not just people to have fun with, but people who are spiritual friends, people you can really count on, people you can share your struggles with, people who make you better, people who draw out of you your highest self, people you can grow in spiritual insight with, people who “get” God, people who know the importance of the gospel, this great good news of a world lit by resurrection and open to the spirit of God, an enchanting world filled with amazing possibilities, where grace reigns, where in all things, absolutely all things, God works for our good, where everyone gets a chance to start over and experience forgiveness, new life, and where by emptying ourselves God fills us.

So this text so full of life's problems – separation, illness to the point of death, danger, disappointment, how demoralizing it is that so many look out only for their own interest – ends in joy. Welcome Epaphroditus with great joy, Paul says.

And it's true. The pathway to joy is traveled with spiritual friends, people who make us better, people who make us wiser, people we can depend on, people who know gospel, who know it's fabulously good news and why, people who know the gospel heals and saves everyone who believes and who will stand firm and risk their lives for it.

Life has its problems. This text is full of them. I found this quote a while ago:

“Life isn't about
waiting for the storm to pass;
it's about
learning to dance in the rain.”

The author is apparently unknown. In any case, the quote is right. On my own I keep waiting for the storm to pass. With God and with spiritual friends, I learn to dance in the rain.

We are each called then to spiritual friendship, to becoming a person others can count on, who looks not to our own interests but to the interests of others, a person others can share their struggles with, and a person who “gets” the gospel, the great good news everyone must hear – that we live in a world lit by resurrection and open to the Spirit of God, a world where grace reigns, where everyone gets to start over, where by emptying ourselves God fills us. And for this we set aside our own interests. We empty ourselves. We risk our lives if need be. In doing this we learn to dance in the rain. And we find our way back to joy.

– Dale Pauls