

“Where Do I Stand?”

Manuscript of Opening Worship Sermon by Bishop Thomas J. Bickerton
Thursday, June 6, 2019, Hofstra Arena

Philippians 1 (NRSV)

1 Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus,

To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons:

2 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

3 I thank my God every time I remember you, 4 constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, 5 because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. 6 I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. 7 It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart,^[L] for all of you share in God's grace^[L] with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. 8 For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. 9 And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight 10 to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, 11 having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

12 I want you to know, beloved, that what has happened to me has actually helped to spread the gospel, 13 so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to everyone else that my imprisonment is for Christ; 14 and most of the brothers and sisters having been made confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, dare to speak the word with greater boldness and without fear.

15 Some proclaim Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from goodwill. 16 These proclaim Christ out of love, knowing that I have been put here for the defense of the gospel; 17 the others proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but intending to increase my suffering in my imprisonment. 18 What does it matter? Just this, that Christ is proclaimed in every way, whether out of false motives or true; and in that I rejoice.

Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, 19 for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance. 20 It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be put to shame in any way, but that by my speaking with all boldness, Christ will be exalted now as always in my body, whether by life or by death. 21 For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. 22 If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I prefer. 23 I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; 24 but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you. 25 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, 26 so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again.

27 Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, 28 and are in no way intimidated by your opponents. For them this is evidence of their destruction, but of your salvation. And this is

God's doing. ²⁹ *For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well –* ³⁰ *since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.*

- I. It's always been interesting to me how we tend to glamorize history. Looking back, we tend to lessen the significance and the struggle that existed at certain points in our history.

I was talking to a couple of pastors a few weeks ago when one of them said, *"I wish I had been a pastor back in the 50s & 60s when it was easier to be a part of the church."*

Really? Let's see. In the 50s we weren't at a point of ordaining women. And in the 60s the heat of the civil rights movement was attempting to gain courage in the midst of violence, discrimination, and terrible acts of racism. Politically, we were in the middle of McCarthy-ism with a vociferous campaign against alleged communists in the U.S. government that bred skepticism, fear, and uncertainty in the most trusted and well-established government system in the world. Sound familiar?

And we haven't said a thing about Vietnam, an undeclared war in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia that left a trail of death and anti-political outbursts that lasted for nearly twenty years!

Yea boy, "those were the days my friends, we thought they'd never end. We'd sing and dance forever and a day. We'd live the life we choose. We'd fight and never lose for we were young and sure to have our way!"

Yep, those good old 50s & 60s. Let's all go back and soak up the peace and solitude and lack of controversy that made up those days!

We tend to glamorize history.

It's like a few years ago when I saw *"Saving Private Ryan."* We came out of the theater and found ourselves walking with an elderly couple who were visibly shaken by the movie. When I inquired as to what they were feeling, the man said, *"I have fought in a war. That movie captured more of the reality of the gruesomeness of war than any film I have ever seen. The only thing it didn't reveal was the ugly smell of war. It brought back so many memories of things I wish I had never experienced and never want to experience again."*

That's a far cry from watching Lee Marvin and Ernest Borgnine running around in neatly pressed uniforms in *"The Dirty Dozen,"* or John Wayne giving some fancy speech in *"The Longest Day."*

We tend to glamorize history.

- II. That's what's so amazing about this first chapter of the book of Philippians. Paul wrote this from prison, a first century Roman prison. This was not a glamorous or easy place. Most people around Paul were awaiting execution.

Because of the convoluted government system, prisoners could be in there for years awaiting a final outcome. There weren't three meals a day or a government issued uniform. The conditions were dark with no natural light, neglected, and had an unbearable smell. It was a place of humiliation and great pain. Hygiene was non-existent, chains were heavy and burdensome, food was scant and unhealthy, and fear was a constant drain on one's mental state.

And it was in that very environment that the Apostle Paul wrote these words:

- *I thank my God every time I remember you.*
- *I always pray with joy because of your partnership from the first day until now.*
- *This is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be blameless for the day of Christ.*
- *What has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel.*
- *Talking about his imprisonment, he says, "What does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, Christ is preached."*
- *I will continue to rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and God's provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance.*
- *For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.*
- *Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy for the Gospel of Christ.*

Come on, really? From a 1st century prison cell? I'd be lucky to rattle a tin cup on the bars singing out, "*nobody knows the trouble I've seen.*" Take away the temptation of glamour and these words really get a powerful edge to them.

And it makes me wonder, . . . How can someone conjure up that kind of faith, that degree of courage, and that level of inspiration when the circumstances seem so grim and discouraging? It's absolutely amazing!

- III. I don't know about you but I've been struggling to find the right words these days. I continue to shake my head in disbelief when yet another shooting happens and I'm speechless with the constant game-playing and uncertainty in our government that leaves innocent victims on the side of the road. I left the special session of General Conference pretty low. I witnessed, what I considered, the church at its worst and that had nothing to do with the decisions that were/were not made.

It was just mean. Painful. Emptying.

And as a result, I have found it pretty challenging to once again find my legs and my voice. It's so hard in the position I hold, but I can't imagine how difficult it is for you being a pastor in a local church or a lay person trying to live out your faith in the workplace. I don't know about you but with a cloud of uncertainty over my head, I don't find it easy to have a lot of joy, and the right words seem more difficult to find.

I know. I know. The situation facing our church in 2019, doesn't compare with being in a 1st century prison cell or on the battlefield of war, or experiencing the violence and humiliation of racism, gender bias, or homophobia.

Still, everything is contextual, and every feeling is real, and every time we hurt, while it may not compare with other situations, the emptiness is still very real. And as a result of what has and is happening to us, I'm struggling to figure out where it is that I can stand.

- IV. Like many of you, I grew up in this church. Jim & Marlene took their son to church for the first time when he was four days old and I've been there every day since.
- Life for many years, as a boy, a youth, a young adult, a lay person, and a pastor, was filled with eager, joyful anticipation of what to expect when you went to church. Memories of full pews and lots of children and churches focused on visions statements and building programs and all kinds of amazing and relevant programs flood my mind. Church was something to look forward to. Even though I didn't ALWAYS want to be there, church was a refuge from the storm. But now, in many places, it IS the storm. Issues dominate the landscape and there is plenty of conversation about what will happen next, will we survive, and how we will make it through. I used to be able stand on that solid ground that my church would be there. But I can't stand there anymore.
 - I remember a day when the church was one of those places in a community where it was described as a place of safety, security, and respect. It was a place where confession was made and forgiveness was freely offered. Pastors were held in high esteem, authority was respected, leadership was trusted, and when you turned the lights on and opened the doors, someone unexpected would come because of the reputation and the word on the street about this blessed thing called the church. *[Tells story of the homeless man at Forrest Burdette.]* But now when the doors open and a scraggly man comes in you can't help but wonder whether or not he has a gun. But those days are gone. I can't stand there anymore.
 - It didn't take a seminary education to learn Wesleyan Theology. I was raised on it and my parents were simple blue-collar workers. We learned from an early age what it meant to be filled with God's grace. We were taught about the value of personal holiness through worship, bible study, and prayers groups. We were expected to convert that personal holiness into a social gospel where you actively engaged the world, shared God's love, invited people on the journey, and actually worked for words that we used to use more frequently: words like "invitation," "conversion," and "evangelism." Church was a place of joy because of what Jesus had done for us and what we could do to make our lives a reflection of Christ in all that we said and did.

But have you been on Facebook or Twitter lately? Or have you googled "The United Methodist Church?" Something happened to our theology. Grace has

been replaced with judgement, respect has been replaced with “my way or the highway,” honoring divergent opinions has been replaced with finger pointing and accusations, and this wonderful Wesleyan theology of grace, hope, joy, loving kindness, doing no harm, and doing good seems to be harder to embrace. I used to stand on that ground with lots of assurance that I would see it at work within people who used the name Christian. But I just can’t stand there anymore with that same assurance.

- I beamed with joy when I was elected to General Conference for the first time in 1976. I’ve been to every one of them since. I was elected as a youth, a young adult, a lay person, a pastor and a District Superintendent. I am a product of the General Conference. I grew up there and learned so much about church polity and structure in that setting. I listened in awe to the “giants” who spoke and the manner in which they would not only craft a speech but construct a proposal. I saw and participated in wonderful initiatives and couldn’t wait to get home to tell everyone about what we had decided and where we were going to put our emphasis for the next season. I loved General Conference! But I can’t stand there anymore. It’s so mean, viral, divisive and backbiting.
- I gave my heart and soul with pride that we could be a global church! I gave so much of myself to it, I was called in some sectors of the church, “Mr. Malaria.” I worked to raise millions of dollars to alleviate malaria and hunger and disease. I loved the partnerships that were established and the ability to take teams to foreign lands to offer words of encouragement and hands of expertise. But now I truly wonder if we can remain a global church. UMCOR giving is down 51 percent over this time last year.

The cultural divide is huge and the line in the sand has very quickly turned into a canyon of differences accentuated by colonialism and an unwillingness to appreciate cultural contexts. I used to stand so confidently on that ground. But I can’t stand there anymore.

Oh, the list could go on and on and on. Don’t you feel like we’re in prison, chained up and hampered by the conditions of the world and the climate of the church? It looks bad, feels bad, and smells even worse.

And it makes me admire the Apostle Paul even more. In the midst of his own contextual grief and fear, he had this amazing gift of being able to proclaim in the midst of adversity and uncertainty the joyful belief that God had claimed him and was using him to be a difference maker in the world.

I truly believe that no matter where Paul was he was never far away from the Damascus road. It was there that God called and shaped and transformed this persecutor into a proclaimer. And I think he never lost sight of what God had done for him. It seems to me that in the midst of our reliance on the human systems that fail us, we need a spiritual revival.

My Dad is kind of that way. Four years ago, this ageless wonder of a man fell and broke three vertebrae in his neck. He can barely use his hands, and his body is fading in its ability. But my Dad, at 83, says, *“Every so often I throw myself a pity party but then I catch myself and thank God for every day I have and a wonderful life I’ve been given.”*

How does a man say that when his body is falling apart? How does a person confined to a dark prison cell proclaim, *“Whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in the one Spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the gospel without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you.”*

How do you do that when the things you have relied on seem to be disappearing right in front of you?

We can’t stand on our history as a denomination? We can’t stand on the pure joy of what we once experienced? We can’t stand on the assurance that Christian people are going to act Christian? We can’t stand on the organization of the church that we have participated in and relied upon? We can’t stand on the belief that we could be a global church?

And when it all piles up as we race from one place to another trying to find some security and assurance, you just want to cry out, *“Where Do I Stand, O God? Where Do I Stand?”*

QUIET . . .

“Standing on the Promises of Christ, my King. Thorough eternal ages let His praises ring. Glory in the highest I will Shout and sing. Standing on the Promises of God.”

“Standing on the Promises I cannot fail when the howling storms of doubt and fear assail. By the living Word of God, I shall prevail. Standing on the Promises of God.”

“Standing on the Promises, I cannot fall. Listening every moment to the Spirit’s call. Resting in my Savior as my all in all. Standing on the Promises of God.”

SING . . .

Standing. Standing. Standing on the Promises of God my Savior. Standing. Standing. I’m standing on the Promises of God”

That sounds like a GREAT PLACE TO STAND to me.

May it be so. May it be so. By God’s grace, may it be so.

Amen.