

## Sermon September 21, 2014 Proper 20A

It has been said that one way to see the church is as a "base camp" as we "climb the mountains" of our lives. Mountain climbers need a place of safety and supply where they can re-charge their batteries before going back out to the heights and the striving, the tumbles and the perils, of their lives. The Church is our base camp and it isn't a place to be comfortable, no matter how much it may look that way to some observers (and members, alas) of the church. We come together, in a sense, for the sake of our going back out again, in mission to the world that God loves. For several weeks, the lectionary turns our attention to the theology of the mystic St. Paul as it is expressed in his letter to the Philippians.

Paul exhorts us to live our lives in a manner worthy of the Gospel of Christ. He is in prison and whether he be released or killed, he would still give glory and praise to Christ. In practical terms this meant showing courage and not being ashamed of his Lord in his distress. He ponders that if he dies, he will be in the immediate presence of Christ. On the other hand, if he lives, he can be of further service. By doing so he could help followers make spiritual progress and learn to be joyous and triumphant in their faith. Therefore even as a prisoner he sees it as a win - win position.

Achieving that level of trust and hope in the Lord takes a lot of faith. Paul has developed such faith through his calling as an apostle and particularly in the suffering he has endured. Once again, suffering is a means of redemption and salvation. It is a core teaching of the Gospel, that Jesus' suffering opened the way to forgiveness, and living a life that leads to heaven. Suffering can be a force which transforms us.

In the musical *Sound of Music* Sister Maria, when confronted by a momentous decision which was to change the entire course of her life, spoke the well-known line of assurance: "When God closes a door, somewhere he opens a window." Millions of Christians who have faced many 'closed doors' (heartaches, trials, and disappointments in their lives) would agree with her confident expression of faith.

In fact, many people we remember as 'Great' have achieved their most heroic accomplishment in the face of 'closed doors'. Beethoven wrote some of his greatest music, including his Ninth Symphony, after he was almost completely deaf. This week The PBS series on the Roosevelts detailed before the viewers the tragedies and triumphs of Teddy, Franklin and Eleanor who steered the course of this country through much of the first half of the 20th century.

What about the ordinary life of ordinary people who still live with the same hungers for goodness and healing, and

the same longing to give glory to God with the gift of their lives? St. Paul doesn't draw a picture of solitary recluses who seek spiritual growth alone; instead, he affirms the life of the gathered community of believers living, working and praying side by side for the sake of the gospel.

In their first-century way, they did what we strive to do today, whether raising funds walking the Crop Walk for the funding of the Sandwich Board and its service to our guests such as providing flu shots this past week. Or how we learn to forgive, one day at a time, or sing our hearts out on Sunday morning and trusting our lives to God. In suffering to be true to the gospel, our worries over calling the next priest, our good and generous stewardship of time, talent, and treasure, our sense of mission beyond our own place and time and loved ones, we are doing week in and week out this special manner of live worthy of the gospel of Christ. We see beyond our own lives and try looking up toward what heights we might reach, climbing together, side by side.

This sounds like rather lofty goals for us human beings. We know that differences of opinions, or mistakes or personality conflicts and other disagreements happen even among church people. Yet Paul teaches us that these obstacles can be overcome when we work together for the common cause. Together we can engage in fruitful labor, make progress and experience joy. We need to convey to others that Trinity Church is a shining place of

hope at the corner of Benton and Lincoln Avenue as it has been for over a century.

We have many questions before us. What do other churches and people of faith, inside and outside the Episcopal Church, hear about us? How does Trinity Church give hope to the world, and offer rest and re-charging to those who are also striving to reach new heights in their life of faith as they also seek to be part of God's transformation of this world? In other words, how is God still speaking to this congregation through the long-ago letter of prisoner Paul who found joy in hearing about the faithfulness of a church that had taken the gospel to heart and was striving mightily to live it out?

For us to succeed, it is central that the Good News of the Gospel anchor us together in spiritual terms. The Church is not a club for fun, fellowship and service. This is the place where we are encouraged to grow and develop more and more into all we can be as human beings and believers in the teaching and person of Jesus Christ. As I said in the beginning, we are mountain climbers ascending to the heights of God's promises. Let our cry ever be, "Onward and Upward!" Amen.