

Christ-Centered

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**Sermon Series: A
Community With
Vision**

Philippians 1:21-26

***We want to be
“A joyful,
contagious,
Christ-
centered
community
devoted to
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Some of you, who have listened to me preach through the years, have remarked that my sermons are loaded with sports analogies. I’m guilty as charged. Admittedly, I’m a sports enthusiast. You think it’s over the top now. I’m tame compared to my growing up years. I was passionate about sports when I was young. Professional athletes were my heroes. I could recite every pitcher’s win-loss record and each batter’s home run and RBI totals. *Sports Illustrated* was my Bible, kept on my bed stand. I can still recall my mother telling me, “Peter, if you applied yourself to your schoolwork with the same intensity you give to sports, you would be a straight-A student.” I never had a good comeback for her. I knew what she was telling me was accurate.

I played every sport imaginable. Whatever one could do to a ball, whether catching it, throwing it, kicking it, hitting it or shooting it, I played it.

I was raised in the country, so I often played alone. I pined away the hours at my basketball hoop, imagining games in my mind where I made the winning shot or sank the winning free throw. As I said, I was passionate about sports.

Church was not my passion in those days. I was raised in the church, but the Christian message never got inside of me. God seemed remote and detached. The thought of an afterlife failed to

captivate my imagination. I didn’t think Jesus was the slightest bit interested in my athletic endeavors. It was only as a college student, when I discovered the difference Jesus Christ could make in my life, that I experienced a profound change of heart.

Passion is not ordinarily a word we associate with God. We are more likely to associate passion with romance, revolution, extraordinary achievement and violence. People are passionate about antiques, dogs, fine wine, fashion, quilting, you name it.

Last Sunday, we examined the opening words of our vision statement, printed on the cover of your bulletin. We aspire to be “a joyful, contagious community.” Today, we explore the next word in our vision statement. We want to be “A joyful, contagious, Christ-centered community devoted to loving and serving God and neighbor.”

The Apostle Paul was passionately Christ-centered. Take his letter to the Philippians, which we examined last Sunday. Paul begins the body of his letter by acknowledging that “my imprisonment is for Christ” (1:13). Paul will stand trial before a Roman tribunal for claiming allegiance to a Lord greater than the emperor. Philippi, like every other city in the first century, was a colony of Rome. Roman subjects were required to pledge allegiance to their Roman Emperor. In 62 AD, Nero was lord of the Roman Empire.

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Paul's affirmation of Jesus as Lord was not only a religious declaration, it was a political act of insurrection. To swear fidelity to a higher authority was tantamount to sedition and punishable by death.

Paul was not shy about revealing his true allegiance. He anticipates a day when "every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord" (2:11). Even Nero one day will bow to Jesus as Lord.

Paul faces the prospect that he will be executed for his allegiance to Jesus as Lord. Yet Paul expresses confidence that this situation "will turn out for his deliverance" (1:19). Paul's deliverance is not contingent on his being released or executed (1:20). Deliverance will come, irrespective of whether Paul lives or dies. Whether dead or alive, sooner or later, Paul will be delivered.

Verse 21 epitomizes Paul's life as a Christian: "For me living is Christ and dying is gain" or alternatively "For me to live is Christ and to die is gain." Literally, the verse reads "to live [is] Christ; to die [is] gain." The phrase "for me" is placed in first position to emphasize Paul's intensely personal confession. These verses bring to mind what Paul writes in Galatians: "I am crucified with Christ; nevertheless it is no longer I who lives, but Christ who lives in me" (2:20).

Paul goes on to say in verse 22, if he goes on living, it will result in fruitful labor for Christ. His departure from this life will be even better (verse 23), for he will be ushered into the fullness of Christ. Either way Paul wins! As Paul writes in Romans, "If I live, I live to the Lord. If I die, I die to the

Lord. So whether I live or die, I am the Lord's" (Romans 14:8).

If you eat an exquisite meal or enjoy a romantic evening or take in a stirring concert, you might say, "Man, this is really living." Paul would say Christ is really living. Christ is living, or alternatively, living is Christ.

Paul counts everything else in life as loss—literally as street garbage—compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Jesus Christ as Lord (3:8). Paul declares, "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings" (3:10).

When my son, Andrew, was an avid baseball player, he wore a tee shirt with the words emblazoned across the front, "Baseball is Life." If Paul were to appear in our lobby after worship, he might be seen wearing a tee shirt with the words, "Christ is Life." Christ is life and life is Christ.

"For me living is Christ and dying is gain." The word "gain" is a monetary term suggesting profit. For Paul, dying is gain because he would be drawn even closer to Jesus Christ.

I doubt many of us would be able to say "dying is gain." Maybe death would be advantageous for those who are aged or terminally ill, but not for people like us. We enjoy this life and would be hard pressed to say death is some sort of gain. We would probably alter the wording to read, "For me, living is gain and dying is Christ."

This verse might strike you as unreasonable. Perhaps it is easier for Paul, as single man without family, to write such things. Paul may be depressed with his life behind bars. Yet, read this letter

How would you complete the sentence: “For me living is [blank]?”

and you’ll find Paul is positively engaged with this world. I suspect Paul knows something some of us need to learn—namely that it’s possible to overvalue this world.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer is one of my spiritual heroes. He might be called a 20th century Apostle Paul. Bonhoeffer courageously refused Hitler’s attempted takeover of the German Lutheran Church during WWII. He was arrested for being a leader in the Confessing Church, a resistance movement opposed to the Nazi Regime. He was arrested by the Gestapo in 1943 and sent to the Buchenwald concentration camp. Like Paul, Bonhoeffer bore witness to Christ’s love in prison.

On Sunday April 5, 1945, Bonhoeffer was leading his fellow prisoners in a worship service. He was preaching from a text in 1st Peter, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into the living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1 Peter 1:3). Just then, two guards flung open the prison door, shouting, “Prisoner Bonhoeffer; get ready to come with us.” He asked his fellow prisoners to send his Bible and few possessions to his family with love. Then he uttered his last recorded words: “This is the end—for me the beginning of life.” He was summoned to a mock court martial, sentenced to death and summarily executed.

“This is the end—for me the beginning of life” is the modern equivalent of Paul’s confession, “For me, living is Christ and dying is gain.”

How would you complete the sentence, “For me living is [blank]”? Would you be able to

say, “For me living is Christ?” If we were brutally honest, we might say, “For me living is pleasure.” Or, “For me living is having a good time.” Or, “For me living is making money and building my portfolio.” Or, “For me living is home remodeling, work, exercise, recreation, a hobby or another person.”

We need more passion in our spiritual lives. Some of us are just going through the motions in church, feigning love for God, when all the while our passions are directed elsewhere. Some of us are not at all passionate about God. We regard God as a sort of side attraction or occasional amusement. Ask yourself, where do I spend my time? Where do I spend my money? What do I think about?

Many of us were inoculated against the flu virus this past year. We were injected with three of the most likely attenuated strains of the flu virus. Receiving antigens of the virus allows our body to mount an immune reaction, thereby keeping us from contracting influenza.

Some people are inoculated against Christianity. They are administered just enough Christianity to never come down with it.

John Wesley was once asked why so many people came to hear him preach. Wesley responded, “I just set myself on fire and other people come to watch me burn.”

Are we on fire for God? Does a holy enthusiasm for Christ fuel our lives?

We aspire to be “A joyful, contagious, Christ-centered community devoted to loving and serving God and neighbor.” We want to be people passionately in love with God. We want to be as passionate about Jesus Christ as we are about

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our work and recreational pursuits. We want to become a God-exalting, Christ-centered, Spirit-driven, Bible-saturated, mission-mobilizing, righteous-loving, justice-pursuing church!

God passionately loves us. Paul writes in Romans, “God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us” (5:8).

Are we passionately in love with God? What is the central passion of your life? What are you living for? For me, living is Christ!

The prayer in your bulletin that closes this sermon is called St. Patrick’s prayer or St. Patrick’s breastplate, since there are parts of this prayer that seek God’s protection. Patrick, who was born in 387 AD, served as the first Christian missionary to Ireland. The fact that we celebrate St. Patrick’s Day on Friday is purely coincidental on our part, since we planned this service months ago. This prayer, however, would be a perfect way to bind ourselves to Christ this week.

You’ll notice in the prayer numerous references to the Trinity; to God who is Three in One and One in Three. St. Patrick was once talking with the King of Ireland about how God could be simultaneously three in one and one in three. Suddenly, Patrick spotted a three-leaf clover, plucked it from the field and showed it to the king. “Look king, the leaves are three, but they are one.”

Prayer of Saint Patrick:

I bind unto myself today the strong name of the Trinity,

By invocation of the same, the Three in One, and One in Three.

I bind unto myself today the power of God to hold and lead,
God’s eye to watch, God’s might to stay, God’s ear to hearken to my need,

The wisdom of my God to teach,
God’s hand to guide, God’s shield to ward,

The word of God to give me speech,
God’s heavenly host to be my guard.

I bind unto myself the name, the strong name of the Trinity,

By invocation of the same, the Three in One, the One in Three,
Of whom all nature has creation, eternal Father, Spirit, Word.

Praise to the Lord of my salvation, salvation is of Christ the Lord.

Christ be with me,
Christ within me,
Christ behind me,
Christ before me,
Christ beside me,
Christ to win me,
Christ to comfort and restore me,
Christ beneath me,
Christ above me,
Christ in quiet,
Christ in danger,
Christ in hearts of all that love me,
Christ in mouth of friend and stranger. Amen.

