“Stand Firm in Faith”

Westminster Presbyterian Church

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*Philippians 1:21-30*

By Shavonn Lynch

Raise your hand if you remember when the WWJD bracelets first became popular, (yes, I understand that we cannot see each other but that’s okay, we can raise our hands wherever we are). These bracelets were wildly popular in the 1990’s and could be found everywhere, seemingly worn by everyone. They came in a variety of styles, colors, shapes, and sizes. I, myself, owned a few in a variety of colors and am sure many of you also purchased a few either for yourselves or for loved ones. For a moment it was cool to sport a bracelet declaring “What Would Jesus Do” and everyone seem to be asking this very question in various settings and situation. “What Would Jesus Do?” in this moment. How would Jesus respond to this situation? One question some asked is would Jesus actually wear one of these bracelets? Perhaps, but maybe Jesus’ bracelet would say, “What Would I Do?”

In our scripture reading for today, we read an exert from Paul’s letter to the church in Philippi. As Paul is writing this letter to believers in Philippi, he is imprisoned in Roman custody. In his absence from the people, Paul is writing to encourage the believers of Jesus Christ to be steadfast in their faith, in Christ. Although Paul is imprisoned for proclaiming the gospel of Christ, he counts it a joy to be a servant of Jesus Christ. He is steadfast in his belief in the redemptive work and saving grace of God through Jesus. With gratitude and humility Paul lives into his calling as an apostle of Jesus Christ. The question of “What would Jesus do” is not circumstantial or situational for Paul but a way of life that has transformed his being into living for Christ. Much like Paul the believers in Philippi face opposition for their faith in Jesus Christ. The dominant culture is pressing in on those who choose to believe in and proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ. To be a believer in Christ is to follow one who is radical and unconventional in his thinking. The gospel calls believers to transform their own thinking in radical and unconventional ways that often go against the morals and values of the dominant culture and so the believers in Philippi find themselves plagued with the same opposition Paul himself faces.

Paul’s word may have been written to the believers in Philippi but as we here today reflect on these words Paul, we may find that we can relate to the opposition that the believers in Philippi faced. Paul encourages believers to live lives worthy of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Living into the gospel of Jesus Christ continues to require believers to radically change the way we think and live in the world which often put us at odds with the dominant society and culture; but more than that it can also put us at odd with family, friends and neighbors. The gospel of Jesus proclaims good news to the poor, the oppressed and the marginalized of society, it calls us to seek justice for the wronged, to mourn with those who suffer lose, to laugh with those who rejoice, to be stewards of God’s good earth and to love God and neighbor as ourselves. Sounds pretty straight forward, doesn’t it? Love God, serve others, and care for creation; and yet when we put the gospel of Christ into practice, we find ourselves faced with opposition.

We declare that God is the God of all creation and not just humanity, the earth is our home, gifted to us by God to tend and care it for as it cares for us. However, too often we fail to cherish the gift of creation; seeking to dominant and subdue creation without concern for the consequence of our action, as a result, there are many who are concerned about the issue of climate change. Let us not be distracted by the debate over whether climate change is real or imagined; that is not the issue. The question of whether we are living into our calling to be stewards of God’s good creation is. To focus on the debate about climate change misses the mark of our calling to be stewards of creation.

As Black Lives Matter protest continue to be held throughout the country with people declaring their solidarity with their black and brown skinned siblings many people push back questioning whether this declaration of Blacks lives matter diminishes the value of the lives of those who are not black or brown skinned. It does not. For all lives cannot matter if some lives are the exception or excluded from the category of all. Ironically, showing solidarity with the “other” has caused division and strife between family, friends, and neighbors. Families are divided, communities are divided, churches are divided. Taking a stand for what one believes in pursuit of proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ will stir up opposition.

The apostle Paul is no stranger to opposition or for that matter persecution having been on both sides of the dividing line. Here in our scripture reading for today Paul stands on the side of Christ, having been transformed Paul is willing to live and die for Jesus. Paul encourages the believers in Philippi to stand firm in their faith in the gospel of Christ. But it is not enough to simply stand firm, the believers must stand firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one another with one mind. When we strive side by side, we are like a chain link fence, standing stronger together then we can alone. With opposition pressing in from all sides the church must remain steadfast to the gospel of Jesus Christ. It should lead us, guide us, and instruct us on how to live for Jesus Christ, our professed Lord and Savior. Opposition is going to come. How we handle it is going to depend on who and what we place our faith in.

Perhaps the question we need to ask ourselves is not “What would Jesus do?” but what has Jesus already done. In his living, and through preparing his disciples to continue the work that Jesus started with them as he journeyed to the cross; he taught his disciples to walk toward people others were walking away from; he taught them to see the value in those society deemed to be the least among them; he taught them to serve the poor, the hungry, the oppressed, the marginalized and the imprisoned. Jesus taught them what and how it meant to live and care for each other in community. In his dying Jesus literally laid down his life for those he loved, suffering death on the cross at the hands of those who opposed his radical and unconventional message of redemption and salvation. Through his resurrection, Jesus defeated death, claiming the victory over darkness, lighting the path to reconciliation and redemption between God and God’s good creation.

 Anthony Ruber and Joseph Rosenbaum died standing up for what they believed in. Their lives lost at the hands of someone who opposed the message they were trying to proclaim. Black lives matter. When we live lives worthy of the gospel of Christ, proclaiming the gospel of Christ we are going to face opposition. Being a follower of Jesus Christ is going to cost us. Losing one’s life is a hefty price to pay for standing up for one’s beliefs. Fortunately, most of us will never find ourselves in the position where our lives are at stake for what we believe but we must ask ourselves what price are we willing to pay? What are we willing to sacrifice to live a life worthy of the gospel of Christ? Friends, family, privilege, comfort. Standing firm in our faith can be a daunting and difficult task. Paul reminds us that we are to stand in unity as the body of Christ. As Jesus was getting ready to be taken up into glory after his resurrection, he made a promise to his disciples that they would never be alone. The Father would send them an Advocate, a helper to remind them of all that Jesus had taught them to equip them for work of the gospel of Christ. As promised, after the Lord is taken up into glory God gifts the disciples with the Holy Spirit, without whom the disciples cannot hope to do the work of the gospel.

When we find ourselves standing amid opposition, tired from the endless fighting and back biting, struggling to find hope where there seems to be none, we too, must remember that we cannot hope to do the work of the gospel without the guidance and strength of the Holy Spirit. Stand firm in what you believe in. The gospel of Christ is always worth fighting for. Amen.