

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

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Striving Side-by-Side

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Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

I want to begin today by inviting you to step into Paul's shoes. Paul writes from a rented room that Rome has turned into a prison. He is not buried in a dark cell, but he is not free either. The empire has narrowed his world to guarded walls, official scrutiny, and an uncertain sentence. A Roman guard may be close enough to hear his prayers and the scratching of the pen as he dictates encouragement to a beloved church.

Death is not theoretical for Paul; it waits as one possible verdict. Yet in that confined space, Paul's imagination is not ruled by fear. He sees his life and death alike as belonging to Christ. If he dies, he gains Christ fully; if he lives, he keeps laboring for the church's joy and faith. From captivity, he calls the Philippians to live as citizens of the gospel; standing firm, striving together, and refusing to be intimidated by opposition.

"Live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ...standing firm in one spirit, striving side-by-side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, and in no way intimidated by your opponents." I need to clarify something about this command. While many Western churches have interpreted and proclaimed this verse as a private, individual call...it is **NOT**.

Rather, Paul's command is deeply communal. He does not picture each Christian standing alone, privately trying to be worthy of the gospel. He calls the whole church to a shared posture: standing firm "in one spirit," striving "side-by-side," gathered around "one mind" and "the faith of the gospel." The image is of a people who hold the line together.

Paul even uses an oddly specific word to describe this striving, *synathlountes*, which is a word that comes to us from Greco-Roman games. The word comes from

the Coliseum and the ancient Olympics! Paul is using teamwork language that the citizens of Caesarea Philippi would have understood easily. Today we might invite people to think of soccer or football teams working together rather than the athletes of Paul's time. This communal understanding of living and striving matters to Paul's point.

Under pressure, fear often isolates; intimidation tries to scatter community into silence, suspicion, or self-protection. But Paul urges the Philippians to answer opposition with unity. Their life together is itself part of their witness. A church living worthy of the gospel is not merely a collection of sincere individuals; it is a body whose courage, mutual loyalty, and shared hope make the reality of Christ visible.

This is why Paul's command matters. Empire does not only imprison bodies; it trains imaginations. It teaches people to compete for scraps, distrust their neighbors, protect themselves first, and believe that someone else's flourishing must come at their expense. It manufactures scarcity and then uses that scarcity to divide.

But Paul, writing from confinement, imagines the church as a community that resists this formation. The Philippians are to stand firm in one spirit, strive side by side with one mind, and refuse intimidation. Their witness is not rugged individual bravery but shared collective courage. In a world and an Empire that seeks to divide neighbors, enforce manufactured scarcity, and pit us against one another; our ultimate witness is to enter the yoke together and strive side-by-side in radical solidarity.

Turning now to the Gospel text, Jesus' parable in Matthew 20 reveals the pressure Paul is warning the church to resist. The landowner pays the workers hired at five o'clock the same denarius as those hired at dawn; a baseline, living wage that was just enough for the day. The offense is not injustice; the first workers receive exactly what they were promised. The offense is generosity. Those who worked longest begin to see their neighbors' provision as an insult, as though another worker having enough means they somehow have less. That is the logic of manufactured scarcity, it trains us to resent mercy when it reaches someone else.

But Paul calls the church to another imagination. To live worthy of the gospel is to refuse the world's invitation to rivalry and instead strive side-by-side, yoked together in the faith of the gospel. In the kingdom Jesus describes, the latecomer's daily bread is not a threat to the early worker; it is a sign of God's abundance.

Of course, this is not always easy in real life. Think of the coworker who gets the promotion you hoped for, the family member who receives unexpected help when you are still struggling, or the person at church who is recognized for something you also quietly offer. In these moments, it can sting to celebrate someone else's blessing, especially when your own efforts feel unseen. But radical solidarity begins when we stop asking, "Why did they get as much as I did?" and start rejoicing that every neighbor has enough.

The workers hired at dawn are not angry because they have been cheated. They are angry because others have been made equal. They received the denarius they agreed to, enough for daily bread. What offends them is that the five-o'clock workers receive the same grace without having "earned" it according to the empire's hierarchy of productivity, seniority, and worth. And that is exactly how Empire keeps its grip on us, by convincing us that there is never enough or that our neighbor is our rival, that someone else being included means we are being pushed out.

Empire wants the dawn workers staring resentfully at the latecomers instead of rejoicing that every household will eat tonight. But Jesus' parable tears the veil off that lie. The kingdom is not built on scarcity, competition, or fear. It is built on the abundance of God, where everyone's dignity is honored, everyone's need matters, and no one's inclusion threatens another's beloved-ness.

Empire runs on anxiety. It keeps us afraid that there will not be enough, and then it teaches us to guard our place by resenting whoever else is welcomed, fed, forgiven, or set free. But Scripture keeps interrupting that anxiety with God's character: "The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love."

That is the truth Jonah cannot bear. He sits sulking under his withered castor plant, angry that God's mercy has reached all the way to Nineveh. It is also the truth the early-morning workers cannot bear. They grumble because the landowner's generosity has reached all the way to the laborers hired at five o'clock. Jonah and

the dawn workers are both offended by grace that refuses to stay within the boundaries of what they think is deserved.

But God asks Jonah, “Should I not be concerned about Nineveh?” And the landowner asks, “Are you envious because I am generous?” Both questions expose the lie of scarcity. God’s Kin-dom economy is not a zero-sum game where someone else’s mercy diminishes mine, or someone else having bread leaves me hungry. It is a place of prodigal abundance, where grace overflows the hierarchies we build, where compassion reaches the people we would exclude, and where everyone is fed.

Like sheep in the wilderness, our survival instincts must become social. Sheep are not built to survive by scattering into heroic individualism. When danger comes, sheep turn toward one another. They draw close. They gather. They become harder to isolate, harder to pick off, harder to terrify. That image matters because Empire trains us in the opposite direction.

Empire cultivates competition and predation. It teaches us to see the vulnerable neighbor as a burden, the latecomer as a threat, the stranger as a rival, the one in need as someone taking what should have been ours. But the gospel and our Good Shepherd calls us back into the flock, back into striving side-by-side, back into the daily practice of belonging to one another.

And that is why Paul’s next word matters so much, do not be “intimidated by your opponents.” Because once the church begins to live this way, yoked together and striving side-by-side, there will be opposition. Some of it is external: the violence of empire, the pressure of unjust systems, the public threats that tell us to sit down, be quiet, and know our place. But some of the opposition is internal, too: the fear that rises in our own bodies, the shame that whispers we are asking for too much, the desire for comfortable compliance that tells us it would be easier to keep our heads down and not make trouble.

Paul himself was no stranger to these struggles. We hear his admission to the church in Corinth, “I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling,” reminding us that even apostles can feel afraid or overwhelmed. Yet he kept going, trusting that Christ’s strength is made perfect precisely in our weakness.

Many of us know what it is to feel anxious or afraid, perhaps doubtful that our courage is enough or ashamed that we do not always feel brave. If that is you, you are not alone. The same Spirit who helped Paul face his own fears is present with us as well, giving quiet courage for every inward struggle.

Paul knows both kinds of opponents. He writes from confinement under Roman power, but he also knows the subtler prison of fear. So he tells the Philippians, do not let intimidation set the terms of your witness. Do not let empire outside you or anxiety inside you scatter the flock. Stand firm. Strive side-by-side. Stay yoked together in the courage of Christ.

This is why the gospel has to reach deeper than our politics, deeper than our public posture, deeper even than our best intentions. If we are going to live lives worthy of the gospel, Christ must put to death the ego's demand to be first. The part of us that says, "I worked longer." "I suffered more." "I deserve better." "Why should they receive the same grace?" That part cannot lead us into the Kingdom. It can only lead us back into rivalry.

Empire loves that self, because that self is easy to frighten and easy to divide. But in Christ, we are given another identity. We do not have to wear the defensive masks of competition, respectability, control, or superiority. We can let them fall, because our cause is not finally in the hands of empire, approval, productivity, or public opinion. "My cause is with the Lord." And if my cause is with the Lord, then my neighbor is not my threat. My neighbor's inclusion does not endanger my place in God's mercy. Grounded in Christ, we are freed **from** the desperate need to be first, and freed **for** the holy work of being liberated together.

Jonah sat isolated in anger, grieving a plant more than a city full of people. The vineyard workers stood isolated in resentment, unable to rejoice that their late-arriving neighbors would also go home with bread. But Paul calls us out of that isolated self-interest and into the public street, side-by-side. He calls us into a life worthy of the gospel, not as anxious individuals guarding our place, but as a people striving side-by-side, yoked together in Christ, and refusing to be intimidated.

So step into the yoke with your neighbor. Refuse the myth of scarcity. Reject the lie that someone else's flourishing threatens your own. Share your bread. Protect the vulnerable. Draw close when the storm gathers. And when Empire tells you to

scatter, compete, comply, or be afraid, stand firm in one spirit; because in the Kingdom of God, no one is free until we are all free together.

Go be human, be humanity, be righteous, be who God created you to be... Amen.