The Westminster Pulpit

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"In conclusion…"
Sermon on Philippians 4:1-9

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Philippians 4:1-9
Therefore, brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved. I urge Euodia, and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my coworkers, whose names are in the book of life. Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. As for the things that you have learned and received and heard and noticed in me, do them, and the God of peace will be with you.

Paul writes: "Finally, beloved…". Finally, beloved…". Wonderful words.

When I was a small boy fidgeting in the church pew, my mother was handing me an object in hopes of keeping me occupied for the duration. But then, I would hear the words, those wonderful words, the preacher would say the words, "In conclusion..." or "Finally, my friends…". And I knew my sentence was nearing an end. "Get busy living or get busy dying." I have since matured over the years, but many of you have not.

As Paul Lyle used to say to me, "Preacher, if you catch me with my eyes closed, it's only because I trust you." When the sermon gets to "Finally, beloved!" it's time to wake up and get

busy living! Paul Lyle - he was just bigger than life - in size and personality. He'd wear Tennessee Orange as if you couldn't already see him coming.

But "Finally…". "Finally…" is a wonderful word.

I can look forward to "finally." A couple of days ago, I received a text from my daughter that she had purchased airline tickets. I responded with a big red heart. And now I look forward to the text that says, "I've landed." I look forward to the Christmas carol-infused drive to the airport. "Glory to God in the highest" combined with "What does that idiot think he's doing passing on the shoulder?" I look forward to picking her out of the crowd. Popping the trunk. Christmas is finally here. "It's good to have you home…FINALLY!" It's a wonderful word.

FINALLY! It's also a sad word.

Because I know her Christmas stay will rush by. She'll get here, and I'll try to suppress the countdown. I'll try to push it to the back…but it will push its way to the top of my list…"In two days, she'll be gone." "Tomorrow she'll be gone." I will hear the sound of her suitcase rolling around on the floor. "Do you have everything?" Finally, it is time to pack up the car. Finally, it is time to drive to the airport. Finally, "Thanks for coming, sweetie. Have a safe trip. Send us a text when you get home." And the drive home is so quiet, too quiet. It is a peace that I don't much care for.

"Finally, Beloved…"

Paul has been getting around to "finally" for quite some time in this letter. I would say he began this letter by saying finally. In the first chapter, he is not sure whether he's staying or going. He writes, "Living is Christ, dying is gain. I am betwixt between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better, but to remain in the flesh… …is more necessary for you."

I think that's being too transparent. He's using his outside voice, and some things are better left unsaid.

Can you imagine saying those words to anyone? In fact, try it. I'll give you a little assignment. Say it to your boss, say it to your coworker, say it to the one you hired to clean out your gutters after the rain. Say it to a loved one. Say it to anyone. Say to them: "Living is Christ, dying is gain. I can't decide whether to die and be with Christ, but it seems more necessary to be with you."

Try it out! Then report back; I'd love to hear how it went! But you won't do it. No one in their right mind would do it!

We worry about people who think they have some control over death and life. We worry about people who are entertaining the thought of "finally."

But this is Paul. And Paul is so transparent, laid bare. It is as if he knows he is close to death. Not of his own doing, but you know. You want to live… you want to live… but you can feel it in your bones. I have seen it so many times in ministry - the will to live wrestling with the need to rest. And when the decision is made to rest… "In my life, I hold those conversations as pure."

I think of Paul Lyle just being open about his life, what he got right, what he got wrong. His hope for eternal life, it has to have some Tennessee football. His love… His love… His love. Finally, beloved. I just get the sense Paul's wrapping it up…going over his life.

"Members of the people of Israel, the tribe of Benjamin, Hebrew born of Hebrews, as to the law a Pharisee, as to zeal a persecutor of the church, as to righteousness…so right…so right…so right… blameless…. And now I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish…."

Finally beloved…

If you entered my office today, you would find my seminary diploma on the floor. In fact, if you entered my office in June, you would have found it on the floor with the glass all broken . June, July, August, September, October - diploma on the floor.

That's kind of where my life is now. I can't decide whether to have the glass fixed or just to let it go. What do you do with a diploma?

I remember sorting out my dad's stuff, looking at his diplomas and taking them out of the frames. I could use the frames, but old diplomas went into the rubbish. When I received the diploma that is on the floor, it was in that cavernous gothic chapel of Princeton University. I was still struggling with the call to ministry. But I remember the organ playing *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*. The organist played it so slowly. So as to make me think about every word…

The Spirit and the gifts are ours through him who with us sideth.
Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also.
the body they may kill; God's truth abideth still. His kingdom is forever!

Tears rolled down my cheeks. It was just the beginning, and it all seemed so big and unknown.

Finally, beloved… I think I'm beginning to know.

Do you know? Because you're in this too. "Partners IN the Gospel," says Paul. "Partners IN God's grace…" says Paul. "Partners IN a harvest that comes through Christ and that will bring God glory and praise. Partners IN the BEGINNING. Partners IN the Now. Partners in Eternity. I think I'm beginning to know… what it is about….

"Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things."

Thinking about these things is not a list of words that we are to define. "True, now what's true. True is the opposite of false." No…No…No… We learned the definitions of those words through people. People who showed Christ Jesus… People who provided light, joy, and peace that surpasses all understanding. People who rejected thinking about and doing "whatever is false, dishonorable, unjust, awful, reprehensible, worthless, and critical." We've had enough of that. Time to move on from that. Rubbish is that.

I've been thinking about these things. We don't get it wrong so much of the time, like those two Paul called out. Euodia and Syntyche. But when we get it right, it's like wow! Did you see that?

And in my ministry, it's like watching a light show! And I thank my God every time I remember you. "Paul Lyle… just welcoming me into the church like he'd been my friend for 50 years." Coming to the hospital room, and there's the member who would be all alone, but she's not because there's Sylvia, Jackie, or Frank or Rosemary.

Rosemary, I remember her sitting down at a table on Wednesday Night back in the days when our Room In The Inn Guests used to join us for Wednesday night dinner. And before the table cleared. Sylvia and a young man who needed to get to an oral surgeon…she just made it happen. It was so loving, like a mother and a son. By the way, you all need to sign up to shine with Room in the Inn or Habitat. I'm sure there's a table in the Parlor where, if you just sign up, it will be like….

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

As for the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, DO THEM, and the God of peace will be with you.

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