

June 7, 2009  
The National Presbyterian Church

## Heroes of Our Journey

Philippians 2:19-30; 4:2-4

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This is the fifth sermon in a series of messages that we are preaching on Saint Paul's letter to the Philippians. I've entitled the whole series, "Sheer Encouragement." Today's sermon is "Heroes of Our Journey" in which we're going to look at some people by name that appear in the Philippian letter. Yesterday was the day when we remember heroes in our own national and world history because yesterday we celebrated and observed the landing on Normandy which was the beginning of the end of World War II -- a very costly beginning of the end. Our president was there at the Normandy cemetery, and therefore, on a day like June 6, we remember the Greatest Generation.

A few years ago, when I was pastor of the University Presbyterian Church in Seattle, one Sunday worship happened to be June 6 itself; and so I said to our people, "If any of you in the room were in the U.S. military or at Normandy on that day, D-Day, would you stand so we can honor you?" About seven or eight men--of course I had several worship services that day, but this one service I'll never forget. About seven or eight men stood up and the congregation applauded them. It was such a moving moment. But the most moving part for me was near the front of the sanctuary where a man stood, what a stately guy. And as he stood up behind him were some college kids and without any prompting from anybody, while he stood, these young men came up and put their hands on his shoulders. It's almost like a generation saying "thanks"; and that's what we need to do. I know the age level of this congregation and I know that there are a number of you in this room that are part of the Greatest Generation; and we say "thank you." Our country said "thank you" yesterday. It was a costly gift of men and women who went to battle for the sake of freedom. We are so grateful. It's the time when we have our heroes, too, and

it's interesting, in our study of Philippians, we're looking at Saint Paul as he names some people who are heroes, too. In the Philippian letter, actually Paul does mention five people by name. And those five names are interesting. I want to track with you today those five names. Paul mentions three of them in the fourth chapter and then two of them in our second chapter -- sort of where we're at in our text.

The three he mentions in the fourth chapter -- the Philippians are probably not as happy to have been named because there is a problem at Philippi. In fact, Karl Barth has made a comment. He said: "No New Testament letter is written apart from the problems of the church."<sup>1</sup> And that ought to be, but I don't know if it is comforting or not. If you've idealized the first century church, it's not so comforting to think that they had problems in the first century church. Look at the Corinthian letters; they had real problems. You get two whole letters to them and the most beautiful chapter in the New Testament is written to that problematic church, 1 Corinthians 13. But the Philippians, this idyllic church that loves Paul so much, they had problems, too. And Paul decides to name them; and he names them because he names the people. I want you to watch how he names people. I want you to watch what he says and what he doesn't say. I want to learn from it and see if this is edifying to you and how you relate in your family. How you relate to grandparents, parents, sons, daughters, friends, people who let you down, for instance, people who disappoint you. Notice how Paul handles it. Notice the way he plays the role as a pastor, father-figure, in a way, to the church as he writes about these problems.

In the fourth chapter, the very last chapter of the book, he starts out by saying that "I love, I long for, you're my joy, you're my crown" he says to the people and then, verse two, "I urge"--actually the word is "encourage," the same word we've been looking throughout the book--"I encourage Euodia and I encourage Syntyche to agree in the Lord." It says here to "be of the same mind in the Lord," to agree in the Lord. "Yes and I also ask you, true yoke fellow"--my partners, and he uses a singular here to refer to the whole church--"help these women." The word for help is *sulambano* in Greek. *Sul* means 'with,' *lambano* means 'to lift.' "Lift these women"--that's the verb that he uses here. "Lift these women, help them"--and then he's not finished though--"for they have competed, struggled side by side with me in the work of the Gospel together with Clement." Now the third person is mentioned. We don't know anything about Clement. Was he a part of the argument that they had? These women had an argument... or is he some other person that was there at the time but he gets named as well? "And the rest of my co-workers whose names are in the Book of Life."

All right, I want you to look at what he does with this problem at Philippi. There are two women--and maybe a third person, Clement-- who are having an argument. We know that because he says, "I ask you, I encourage Euodia and Syntyche to

agree in the Lord.” He admits, therefore it’s out in the open now, that there is an argument going on. That shouldn’t be new. The turbulent line of history goes through the church just like it goes to the world, so we shouldn’t be surprised that churches have problems. This church. Philippi, has a problem. These two women are arguing.

There are two ways to get your name in the New Testament. One is to be one of the great heroes... or it is to be a problem. Either way you get your name in the New Testament. And so Euodia and Syntyche are named because they have an argument. Notice what Paul says and what he doesn’t say. He doesn’t get involved in the argument. After all he’s many miles away. He admits there is an argument. He does name them. He doesn’t say... I’m glad he says this, “Euodia and Syntyche,” instead of saying, “I understand two people are having an argument.” That would not be good. Then everybody’s wondering, “Who are they?” He names them, but he does it with such respect. “I encourage Euodia, I encourage Syntyche, agree in the Lord.” He doesn’t say to agree in the issue. They may actually disagree in the issue and yet find together a deeper agreement in the Lord. What a profound pastoral insight from Saint Paul. It’s possible to actually disagree with someone in terms of strategy, in terms of tactics, even the color of the carpet (which has caused more problems in churches than you can imagine). You could actually disagree on that and yet find an agreement in the Lord. And that’s what he’s asking for. I’m asking you, women, to find the deepest place where you can stand together in the Lord -- the Lord Jesus Christ.

And then he says, “I ask you true yokefellow church members, help them.” Notice he doesn’t give seven steps toward church discipline. This is not a Book of Order type text. Instead he says one word, “Help them.” He leaves it on their shoulders to help them. What would lift? What would help? Some things aren’t helpful, other things are. He leaves that for the church to discern -- help them. And then one last word, “And don’t forget, they are co-workers of mine. They labored side by side with me in the work of the Gospel, together with Clement, and their names are in the Book of Life.”

It’s almost as if Paul’s like a CEO. Imagine a CEO of a corporation comes down to the landing dock and he enquires about a couple of boys there; he knows about these boys and he says, “I understand these two boys are having a big argument down here in the landing dock, would you--” and he looks at the manager of the landing dock and he says, “Would you kind of watch out for these boys and kind of take care of them and help them work this through? Would you?” And then the manager says, “Okay” (after all this is the CEO of the company -- ‘What’s he down here for?’-- he wonders). And then, as the CEO leaves to get in his Rolls Royce, he pulls out his wallet and says, “Oh, by the way, I have both these boys’ pictures in my wallet. They’re my nephews. Keep your eye on them.” Well, now the manager’s going to work more carefully with these boys because the owner has their pictures



in his wallet. That's exactly what Saint Paul does. He says, 'Don't forget these two people and Clement. Their names are in the Book of Life. God knows who they are. He cares about them, so you handle them with care.' What a marvelous way to approach people who are in crisis, to realize that they're beloved. It's wonderful.

And then following that comes a very interesting sentence that many people will write in their Bible as a favorite verse. Have you written this verse in your Bible? I've written it lots of times. Philippians 4:4. That's the next word. "Rejoice in the Lord always. Again, I say rejoice." I was intrigued that Paul would repeat that sentence twice. He ordinarily doesn't do that. Isn't it enough to just to say, "Rejoice in the Lord"? But notice he repeats it. "Rejoice in the Lord always. Again, I say rejoice." It's a favorite verse. But why does he say it twice? I have a hunch. It's because maybe now the Philippian church knows that the dirty laundry of Philippi has been put out in the open for everybody to see. They're not necessarily in the mood to rejoice.

Think of it. They now know that throughout the whole first century church, they all know about the problem down at First Church Philippi. Nobody likes to hear that. When somebody says, "I understand there's a big problem down at your church." Who wants to hear that? "I understand the big problem you've got and now it's out in the open. This will be in all the Bibles: *King James*, *RSV*, and *NIV*, down through the ages. And so maybe they're not in the mood to rejoice, so Paul repeats it. I think that's why he repeats it twice, "Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I say, rejoice. The Lord is nearby."

Well, that's a great text and they're going to treat Euodia and Syntyche with a lot of care, and also Clement. I think that was wonderful the way Paul handles them. We learn a lot on how to handle people in crisis from that one text. But we did get even with Euodia and Syntyche for having that argument. So if you're going to be in an argument, be careful because we will get even with you. We did not name our daughters after Euodia or Syntyche. I have never met a Euodia. Raise your hand if there's a Euodia in the congregation. There is none. I have never met a Syntyche. Those are two perfectly good female names in the Greek language. I've never met a Syntyche or a Euodia. A few Clements, but never a Euodia or a Syntyche. So we got even with them. So be careful. If you cause too much trouble, we won't name our kids after you. We don't want our kids to be known as the kids who get into arguments all the time, and Paul has to write a letter about it. But he does say, "Rejoice in the Lord always. Again, I say rejoice."

Then in the second chapter, there are two more names he mentions and these names we'll especially look at. He says, in the second chapter right after the text we looked at last week, "I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon so that I may be cheered by news of you. I have no one like him who will genuinely be concerned for your welfare. All of them seek their own interests, not the interest of Jesus Christ, but Timothy's worth you know, how like a son with the father he has served with me in the work of the Gospel. I hope therefore to send him as soon as

I see how it goes with me. And I trust in the Lord that I also will come soon.” That doesn’t happen, but that’s what he hopes.

Timothy, we met him at Lystra. He has a Jewish mother and a Jewish grandmother, Lois and Eunice. A lot of people have been named after those two. They’re the mother and grandmother of Timothy. They were Jewish women who loved the Lord and Paul knew them very well. Timothy’s father is a Greek, and we don’t know anything about the father which means he either died, or the father left, who knows? And that’s why Paul can call Timothy his son because he adopted him, in a way, and Timothy adopted Paul. Young people often do that. They will adopt somebody as a kind of borrowed parent. Thank God for that. And so Paul and Timothy are great friends. Timothy travels with Paul. The last letter Paul will write before he dies is to this young man -- 2 Timothy. And now he’s sending him out to later follow Epaphroditus and check on his church, that’s the man. What a hero he is and Paul honors him. The way he honors him is so beautiful here. ‘He’s like a son, he’s traveled with me. He’ll care very much for you when you meet him.’

But then he has a second name to mention as well. “Still I think it necessary also to send to you Epaphroditus.” Now, Epaphroditus is one of theirs. They sent this young man to Rome when they heard that Paul was in prison. And they sent him to help keep Paul alive. He’s probably a young man sent to Rome to be near the prison where Paul is because that’s what you had to have -- some people on the outside that would watch out for you. Then Epaphroditus becomes ill, and because he’s ill he has to go home. Now, think about it for a minute. They have sent this young man to help Paul. Paul’s the guy that’s near death. Paul, the man that’s in danger of facing the lions, and yet Epaphroditus gets sick and has to come home. How are they going to treat him when he comes home? ‘We should have sent a healthier guy, I will tell you that. Maybe he didn’t really get as sick as we think he did, maybe it’s homesick he got.’ I don’t know what they’ll say. Who knows what they might say. But Paul sends a letter with Epaphroditus. We’re grateful for that. If he hadn’t become ill, we probably wouldn’t have the Philippian letter, since Paul wrote this letter to go with Epaphroditus.

Now listen to what Paul says about that young man. “I think it necessary to send Epaphroditus, my brother, my co-worker, my fellow soldier, your messenger, your minister to my need.” That’s quite a pedigree, isn’t it? My fellow worker, my fellow soldier, my brother and your minister to me. Wow. “For he has been longing for you and has been distressed because you heard that he was ill. He was indeed so ill that he nearly died.” So Paul clears up the question now that maybe it was a kind of a modest illness. He says, “He almost died.” He was really ill. In fact, he was so ill he nearly died. “But God had mercy on him, and not only on him but also on me that I would not have sorrow after sorrow. I am the more eager therefore to send him to you in order that you may rejoice at seeing him.” Folks, Paul wants a parade for this young man.

We didn't say thanks to our young men and women when they came back from the Vietnam War. That was a big mistake America made. Thankfully, a monument in the mall has partly made up for that. But guys came back from the Vietnam War and they were not treated as heroes, and Paul doesn't want that kind of mistake. He wants Epaphroditus honored. So notice what he says, "I am eager to send him so that you may rejoice at seeing him again. And then I may be less anxious. Welcome him then--" by the way, the word 'welcome' here is the word for 'hug.' Put your arms around him and pull him toward you. Put your arms around him and bring him toward you. "Welcome him then in the Lord with all joy." There's that word again. "And honor such people." You know, the word 'honor' in Greek, means 'treasure.' In the Old Testament, the word 'honor' which appears in the Ten Commandments, "Honor your father and your mother" means 'weigh heavy.' And so he uses this wonderful word, "honor." "Weigh heavy this young man."

You know, this is a great text. It's a text where he asked the church to welcome Timothy, who will come later, and realize what a tremendous person Timothy is. Notice how he builds him up and then how he builds up this young man, Epaphroditus, who's sort of a failed missionary. He builds him up as a partner, co-worker who risked his life. He wants that church to hug him and bring him in and honor him.

I've wondered about this text, and a lot of people have wondered. Is this dangerous in Christian circles to honor people so much? Some people think maybe it's not a good idea because it'll go to your head. If you praise people too much, is that dangerous? Is it dangerous to praise your kids too much at graduation time or baccalaureate? Or is it dangerous to praise your parents when they have their 10th anniversary, or their 20th anniversary, or their 50th or 60th? Might it go to their head? Might it make them proud? And after all, pride comes before fall. So, is it dangerous to praise people too much?

When Fanny Crosby started to write poems and began to get a little recognition for her poems, there were some of her strict Calvinistic relatives who told her mother, "Don't make a big deal over it with this--your blind songstress. It'll go to her head." And so for a while, it slowed Fanny Crosby down and she didn't write so many poems. But thank God other people didn't do that. Other people said, "Thank you for your songs." And that's why we have "Blessed Assurance, Jesus is Mine!" And that's why we have "To God be the Glory" which we will sing at the close of worship today. They were scared to praise her too much because it'd go to her head. What about that?

C. S. Lewis gave a great speech in 1942. Let me read from it. In 1942, during a very dark time during World War II, he gave a speech in Oxford University at Old Saint Mary's Church. And the place was jammed to hear his evensong sermon, "The Weight of Glory,"<sup>2</sup> his greatest speech. He built it on the text from the book of 2



Corinthians that “we have this temporary hardship, but it prepares us for an eternal weight of glory.” So it’s a great speech on what is that weight of glory that God has ahead for us. We’re now in a very dangerous time and what is the weight of glory? Lewis says,

*I turn next to the idea of glory. There’s no getting away from the fact that this idea is very prominent in the New Testament in early Christian writings. Salvation is constantly associated with palms, crowns, white robes, thrones, splendor like the sun and the stars. All this makes no immediate appeal to me at all, and in that respect, I fancy I’m a typical modern. Glory suggests two ideas to me of which one seems wicked and the other ridiculous. Either glory means fame or it means luminosity. As for the first, since to be famous means to be better known than other people, the desire for fame appears to me as a competitive virtue, and therefore more of hell than of heaven. And as for the second, who wishes to become a kind of living electric light bulb? Luminosity. So as I began to look into this matter, I was shocked to find such different Christians as John Milton, Johnson, Thomas Aquinas taking heavenly glory quite frankly in the sense of fame or good report. But not fame conferred by our fellow creatures, but fame by God, from God, with God. Approval, I might say, appreciation by God. And then when I thought it over, I saw that this view was scriptural. Nothing can eliminate from the parable-- [that would be in Luke 19, the great parable of the talents.] the divine accolade, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant. You’ve been faithful in a few things, I’ll give you more things to do.’ With that a good deal of what I had been thinking all my life fell down like a house of cards. I suddenly remembered that no one can enter heaven except as a child and nothing is so obvious in a child, not a conceited child but a good child, as his or her great and undisguised pleasure in being praised. Apparently what I had mistaken for humility had all these years prevented me from understanding what is in fact the humblest and most child like, the mostly creaturely of pleasure. Nay, it is a specific pleasure of the inferior. The pleasure of a child before his father, of a pupil before his teacher, of a creature before his creator. I’m not forgetting how horribly this most innocent desire is parodied in our human ambitions or how very quickly, in my own experience, the lawful pleasure of praise from those whom it was my duty to please turns into a deadly poison of self-admiration.*

Listen closely though.

*But I thought I could detect a moment, a very, very short moment before this happened during which the satisfaction of having pleased those whom I rightly loved and rightly feared was pure. And that it was enough to raise our thoughts to what might happen when a redeemed soul beyond all hope and nearly beyond belief learns at last that he or she has pleased him whom she was created to please.*

There’s no room for vanity then. Actually, this is what makes us humble, is to know that God likes us. God loves us. We please him. He sang a song when he created you.

Paul wants to take that risk with the Philippians. He wants to take the risk that it might give them the big head -- but he's willing to take it. He wants them to know how treasured Euodia, Syntyche, and Clement are. Their names are in the Book of Life. And he wants them to know how great a man Timothy is, this young man, and how fine a man Epaphroditus is. He wants them to hug him. He wants them to honor him, because that's flowing out of the Gospel. He wants that for you, for me. He wants us to honor the Greatest Generation. He wants us to honor our children, our grandchildren, our parents. He wants that. He wants us to share that Good News; and we're coming to the Lord's Table where he shared it with us.

In the Lord's Table, they were celebrating the Seder to celebrate the Exodus out of Egypt. When the bread is broken, the youngest boy is supposed to ask, "Father, what does this mean?" and then the father tells about the Exodus. But the big surprise is that, when Jesus breaks the bread, he says, "This is my body broken for you. This is the cup of the new covenant of my life given at the cross for you." So that suddenly we discover this is for us. This is how important we are. This is how much he loves us. Now we can come to the Lord's Table.

Heavenly Father, thank you. Thank you for Saint Paul and what he's teaching us here about how to relate to each other and how to treasure the people in our lives. We get a chance to do it at these key moments in their lives. Lord, help us never to let it go by. And we thank you that it's what really makes people humble when we realize how much we are loved by surprise. So, Lord, may we experience that as we come to the Lord's Table right now. In Christ's name, we pray, Amen.

1 quotation by Karl Barth, from *The Lectionary Commentary: Theological Exegesis for Sunday's Texts*. Van Harn, Roger E. 2005.

2 Lewis, C. S. "The Weight of Glory." *The Weight of Glory: And Other Addresses*. ©1949, C. S. Lewis, Ptd. Lte. Copyright renewed ©1976, revised 1980 C. S. Lewis Pte. Ltd. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc.

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*Sunday Worship at 9:15 & 11 a.m.*  
*Classes for Adults, Youth, and Children at 9:15 a.m.*

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