

Shiloh United Methodist Church

Give Up “I Like”

Philippians 1:12-26 Rev. Tyler Amundson February 10, 2019

Spoken Word –

For the next several weeks we are going to be studying the letter to the Philippians. It is a part of our Bible full of instructions to a community on how to live together, from Paul, a leader following Christ who hoped others might find in his example a way to live in the Grace and Love that Christ shared with the world. Our image for this series is two people pulling at each other across a great chasm, which is very much what our world can feel like today.

Each week of this series you will be asked to give something up, to recognize that as Christians we know that to make community to work, we have to let go, and let God enter into our lives as a people. My hope is that we all find things we can let go to God, so that in the grace of God we might connect to one another. Today as we enter worship I invite us to consider what things that we “like” having in our lives we might have to give up, for the communities in our lives to come together.

Philippians 1:12-26 Common English Bible (CEB)

¹² Brothers and sisters, I want you to know that the things that have happened to me have actually advanced the gospel. ¹³ The whole Praetorian Guard and everyone else knows that I’m in prison for Christ. ¹⁴ Most of the brothers and sisters have had more confidence through the Lord to speak the word boldly and bravely because of my jail time. ¹⁵ Some certainly preach Christ with jealous and competitive motives, but others preach with good motives. ¹⁶ They are motivated

by love, because they know that I'm put here to give a defense of the gospel; ¹⁷ the others preach Christ because of their selfish ambition. They are insincere, hoping to cause me more pain while I'm in prison.

¹⁸ What do I think about this? Just this: since Christ is proclaimed in every possible way, whether from dishonest or true motives, I'm glad and I'll continue to be glad. ¹⁹ I'm glad because I know that this will result in my release through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ. ²⁰ It is my expectation and hope that I won't be put to shame in anything. Rather, I hope with daring courage that Christ's greatness will be seen in my body, now as always, whether I live or die. ²¹ Because for me, living serves Christ and dying is even better. ²² If I continue to live in this world, I get results from my work. ²³ But I don't know what I prefer. I'm torn between the two because I want to leave this life and be with Christ, which is far better. ²⁴ However, it's more important for me to stay in this world for your sake. ²⁵ I'm sure of this: I will stay alive and remain with all of you to help your progress and the joy of your faith, ²⁶ and to increase your pride in Christ Jesus through my presence when I visit you again.

This scripture and all our scriptures for this series will come from Phillipians. Phillipians is a letter to the people in the Christian community at Phillipi from Paul, the early Christian leader converted after persecuting Christians, to go share the gospel with those outside the Jewish communities where Christianity began. I am going to get into more detail about this passage later in the service, but a few things we all should know about Phillipians. Paul in this book gives instructions to these Christ followers about how they might get along despite their differences, he writes this from a prison cell, and we historically this may be the last letter written before Paul dies. Preaching the Gospel of Christ was illegal and Paul intentionally disregarded that law to bring the Good News to people. For this work, he was imprisoned.

Lastly, not all of the letters in the New Testament attributed to Paul, were written by Paul. There was a strong tradition of writing in the mindset of another leader, it was not seen as wrong, but as a way to pass on their legacy. From literary and historical evidence we believe this letter was genuinely written by Paul. We will get back to our passage for today.

I want to share a story with you all.

There is a beautiful land where people lived on either side of a great river. The river provides life and nurture for the land and the people. They took from the river fish and water to help them grow and thrive. Each year, the people became quite good at building bridges across the river. The bridges helped the people share stories, goods, livelihood, and knowledge with one another. Across these bridges the people would come together over the great river to build life in their beautiful home.

This land was also subject to great storms with lots of rain and flooding. Almost every year the water would rush down the river and wipe out the bridges that people had built. Each year the people would see their connection wiped out, the bridges they had worked so hard on wiped away by the storms. Then they would spend time rebuilding the bridges to connect one another again. This pattern continued year after year, season after season.

Eventually the people decided they would build a grand bridge that would withstand the yearly storms. They invited engineers and builders from around the world to come and help them construct this great structure. Then after the bridge was completed there was a great storm, hurricane Mitch came and did terrible damage to the region. Imagine what happened to the bridge.

(Picture Shown: http://4.bp.blogspot.com/_s_cPvJgyTI0/TMPq-xLrEHI/AAAAAAAAAC4/Gv1wmAf4F3U/s1600/Slide3.jpg)

This story is real and it happened in Honduras, and no one building the large and much beloved bridge could have ever predicted that the entire river would move this dramatically.

The Christian Church in the 20th century was supposed to be the solid bridge crossing the things that divide us, and bring our community together. We built a mighty church and sent people around the world. Only we have learned from those missionaries stories that they encountered a world so deep and diverse that they found their Christian faith had trouble translating to all people. Christianity could not bridge every challenge, or at least our understanding of it.

Then a storm of increasing progress, globalization, connectivity through science and technology, wars that involved the whole world, and a literally forcing together of our interaction moved the river flowing through the divide between us. When the river moved and the purpose for our bridge of faith no longer made sense, it no longer bridged the divide to connect humanity. It instead made the church appear a monolith and a object of another time.

It used to seem like our religion was a grand bridge that would bring us peace and understanding. When we used to see scriptures from Paul, like the one we are studying today we would understand them as saying, "Pray and be present in God's peace and God's unity will come to the earth." The peace that passed understanding that we received from God came from being nice to our neighbor and in most cases it was assumed our neighbor would look, act, and be like us. This is not the world, however, I think God has in mind for us and from my reading of scripture it may not ever have been the call of Christian disciples. Instead perhaps the instruction should have been, "Pray, give up that

which separates you from God, and follow God's Holy Spirit in the world and then in God's grace we might bridge the divide more often than not."

This story about the bridge is one a good friend of mine, a colleague in Washington shares with the churches she works with. She often finishes this story about the bridge by reminding Christian churches that perhaps we are not called to build the monolithic bridge, but instead other modes of conveyance to connect people across the great river of life. Perhaps we as Christians are invited to build the boat, hovercraft, or other conveyance that can get us back and forth.

How do we help one another, Christian and non-Christian, sisters and brothers in humanity traverse an ever more rapidly moving river changing course?

This week I am going to focus on one rule we learn from Philippians and Paul, we have to give up saying and living the term "I like."

We talk about this when we talk about our call as Christians to be generous too, our American culture is toxic with teaching us to embrace only things that make us comfortable. Advertisers know this, and so we are told we can buy the things that make us comfortable and we can avoid discomfort. The self-help industry of book writers know this too, they continue to write books to help us circumvent the practical work of knowing who we are personally and instead trying someone else's 10 step plan to look better, be healthier, learn easier, and fix life.

The reality is, the big bridge from before, that was someone's 10 solution plan for the people who lived near the river. Additionally, I think and hope some of us are wondering by now isn't Paul's letter to the Philippians just his 10 solution plan for their problems.

If we look to our passage for today the difference between Paul and a self-help book is that he trust God's grace will work through even where the book fails. He does not pretend his answers will fix the problem, but instead that by doing his best to follow Christ he might live as an example of how the world might be transformed.

Consider for a minute where Paul finds himself at this point, he is not in a comfy office after years of ministry. Instead he is in a prison cell, facing execution as a potential outcome. Paul gave up the "I like" the idea of being the successful guy in culture a long time ago, and trusted God to use him to transform the world.

Consider that Paul also sees others preaching who are selfish, he could issue strict instructions on how to control those people. Instead he offers a trust in God to work through even those people. Paul gave up the "I like" of being the one in charge of the community even when they still consider him a leader.

Consider that Paul wishes his life was near an end, that he has grown tired and we can imagine his prison cell was not pleasant. However, he has let go of the "I like" of knowing even where his life might end, trusting that while he is still alive he might offer something to those whom God places in his life.

Finally consider, that Paul has given up on his deepest belief after he began following Christ, that Christ would return before Paul died. One of the core beliefs of Paul's early life he has let go of, because he now trusts that God will connect people to Christ even after he is gone. Paul has understood he is a part of the body, not the center of it.

Giving up the things we would like in our lives can be hard. The "I likes" of our lives are often given to us by society or by family. They also cause us to struggle to understand what might be next for us when

things don't work out to our conclusions.

I had a friend who was determined to grow up and be Michael Jordan. Then he figured out he wasn't quite as fast and strong as Michael Jordan. My friend was pretty good at track and baseball though. He pursued baseball in hopes of going pro, that didn't work out either because during tryouts for college he threw his arm out. So, he ran track in college and he thought he would go coach. However, someone called him to be a full-time youth pastor just before he signed a contract and it let him stay near and marry the love of his life. Without all that happening, I probably wouldn't be standing here today because that man is a part of why I am in ministry.

This brings me to a story from Jesus' ministry I want to share with us to let us know that giving up "I like" may be the only way to really follow Christ. In the gospel of Matthew Simon Peter is called as a disciple to follow Jesus. Jesus basically says, "Come and follow me." Peter supposedly just drops his nets and follows Jesus. The story always felt a little lacking to me, it is why I am thankful for multiple gospels.

Luke's gospel instead says that Jesus asked to borrow Peter's boat, that Jesus teaches from the boat. Then he invites Peter to go fishing, Peter is reluctant. They just finished cleaning their nets for the day, after catching no fish. Peter is thinking, "I like being in control of this life I am leading, I know how to fish Jesus." I think Peter goes out to fish just prove Jesus he knows better. Peter puts down his nets and so many fish swim in the net starts to swamp his boat. Peter calls another boat over to help them and so many fish come in it begins to sink both boats. Jesus then calls Peter to follow him to "fish for people."

Peter being Jewish has already tried to follow a Rabbi to fish for people, it was practice for young Jewish boys to attempt to follow a Rabbi to see if they would become Rabbi's themselves. When they would

essentially flunk out, then they would return to their families trade. Peter has agreed to the “I like” of his culture of imagining God would not call him to offer support to any Rabbi or leader, but to remain a fisherman.

Jesus as usual has other plans for his “I like,” his understanding of the way things should be. A reminder that the way we think we will get to God’s kingdom, to a world where all are one, is rarely the way God has in mind.

So friends go this week and consider what things in your life you need to let go of, the things you like or have been taught to like that Christ might be asking you to give up to help build the conveyance to connect people across the great river of life. The bridge isn’t where it needs to be anymore, what shall we build to bring God’s people together?

Prayer and invitation

Today I will close us with prayer, then I will ask you to write something you like on a popsicle stick, something you like that you think God might be asking you to give up for the community of Christ. We will then ask you to place it in the basket here as you come up for communion and we will use these to build something as our series continues.

Prayer shared.