

**Second Sunday of Lent C**  
**Philippians 3:17—4:1**

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**Problem in the Text**

Biblical Scholars have long known that there is an archeology dig one can do in the pages of Paul's letters. You can learn a lot about the people of Galatia, Corinth, Rome, etc., and the concerns of the early church in the themes and specific admonitions to the communities to which Paul wrote. Philippi was a large mining town on the east-west trade route through the plains of Macedonia. The city was under Roman rule in Paul's day. In the Book of Acts, Philippi is the scene for some of the best highs and worst lows of Paul's mission work. Paul encounters the openness and generosity of Lydia, who welcomes him into her household. But he also is "presented with the financial and legal woes represented by the girl with the spirit of divination." In the Book of Acts we learn that Philippi was a hard place to do ministry, it was an alien and superstitious world. In Paul's Letter to the Philippians, we learn that for this emerging Christian community, the question became "how do we live our Christian values in the face of the pressure to conform to cultural norms?" Some in the Early Church of Philippi appear to have received the Gospel, but were living a life that was still honoring the demand to attend to public temple worship so that they could be seen as good citizens and prosper in business. Paul tells the Philippians, "For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears. Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things." For Paul, there is no compromise between citizenship in the Roman state and what Christ called his followers to be in the world.

**Problem in the World**

When I heard that Harper Lee, the author of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, died Friday, I thought about how the hero of her novel, Atticus Finch, became a lynchpin for so many in their understanding of race issues in the USA just at the beginning of the Civil Rights era.<sup>1</sup> Harper Lee wrote in response to news that the Virginia public schools were banning her book in 1966, "'Surely it is plain to the simplest intelligence that *To Kill a Mockingbird* spells out in words of seldom more than two syllables a code of honor and conduct, Christian in its ethic, that is the heritage of all Southerners." Even now I believe that all of us who have read the book or have seen the movie instantly remember the tension between those who were "feeding their bellies" by the racial status quo of the deep South in the novel and Atticus Finch, who puts his and his families' lives in danger by insisting on justice for all under the law. That was the world of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Those who stood bravely for civil rights did so to the point of their own deaths. Some refused to enter the battle and remained attached to their comforts in the segregated status quo. Many continue to struggle for justice in this nation. In her slim novel, Harper Lee calls us all to consider where we are in the struggle, both in the setting of the novel and in our own time. I wonder about today and where we stand in the balance between what the world demands of us in order that we feel comfortable and secure in our status; and what Christ calls for us to be in the world.

This tension persists. We can't all be St. Francis, who literally dropped his clothing and gave it all up for a life dedicated to Christ. We have families, responsibilities, work: all the demands upon us that are the "American Dream." Paul calls us to see that tension and ask ourselves whether we are letting our god become our bellies and whether we have set our minds "on earthly things." If we have, then the glory we find in the world will be our shame before Christ. There is an implied warning that we may even become the enemies of Christ.

**Grace in the Text**

Paul sounded a warning for those who followed Christ in Philippi, he told them they are set apart because, "*our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ...*" The Philippian Christians needed to turn away from the old norms of citizenship in Roman society and turn their concerns toward heavenly citizenship. As Christians, they are changed as a people. Their own belly was no longer what motivated their lives. Paul writes, Christ "*will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself.*"

That self-centeredness and all of the talents and giftedness that fed into the old ways - those worldly measures of success: status, wealth, comfort - were transformed by faith. All that they were in the old system transformed and worked for Christ, worked for the building of the kingdom.

### **Grace in the World**

In Paul's time, the marking of Lent and the practice of a Lenten fast had not yet developed. The concern of his missions was to get the Gospel message out and help people live lives transformed by Christ. Paul tried to model what that would look like in their world and time: to stand firmly as Christians in contrast to the demands of the religious and state powers. Last year, Pope Francis wrote an interesting address to Christians at the beginning of Lent. I think it echoes Paul's concern in his letter to the Philippians. Pope Francis wrote, "Indifference to our neighbor and to God... represents a real temptation for us Christians. Each year during Lent we need to hear once more the voice of the prophets who cry out and trouble our conscience."

Describing this phenomenon he calls the *globalization of indifference*, Francis wrote that "whenever our interior life becomes caught up in its own interests and concerns, there is no longer room for others, no place for the poor. God's voice is no longer heard, the quiet joy of his love is no longer felt, and the desire to do good fades." He wrote that, "We end up being incapable of feeling compassion at the outcry of the poor, weeping for other people's pain, and feeling a need to help them, as though all this were someone else's responsibility and not our own."<sup>ii</sup> "But when we fast from this indifference, we can begin to feast on love. In fact, Lent is the perfect time to learn how to love again. Jesus—the great protagonist of this holy season—certainly showed us the way. In him, God descends all the way down to bring everyone up. In his life and his ministry, no one is excluded."<sup>iii</sup> As Paul wrote, "He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself."

Lent is all about allowing ourselves to be transformed by Christ. We take a fast from those things that make us feel fat on the world, and turn our attention to those things which help us feast on Christ and all of the things that the kingdom values: love of our neighbor, concern for the poor, a deeper relationship with God. If we turn our fast into such a feast, I think we will be transformed. The impulses which once pushed us to sin become the very gifts that turn us and transform us into the people Christ calls us to be.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Harper Lee Twits School Board In Virginia for Ban on Her Novel", The New York Times (January 6, 1966), p. 82.

<sup>ii</sup> As found in <http://time.com/3714056/pope-francis-lent-2015-fasting/>

<sup>iii</sup> Christopher J. Hale in "Pope Francis' Guide to Lent: What You Should Give Up This Year" Feb 18, 2015.