

## WHY INVOLVEMENT? Philippians 2:12-16

*A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward, on October 20, 2019, the Twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia, as part of a fall sermon series entitled “Why...?”*

### **Philippians 2:12-16**

*Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.*

*Do all things without murmuring and arguing, so that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine like stars in the world. It is by your holding fast to the word of life that I can boast on the day of Christ that I did not run in vain or labour in vain.*

Toward the end of the week, as I was pondering the topic of today’s sermon “Why Involvement?” a phrase kept entering my mind which has always intrigued me but on which I have never preached. The phrase comes from Paul’s letter to the Philippians: “Work out your own salvation in fear and trembling.” Because the phrase would not leave me and let me get to the scripture passages I had chosen for the sermon, I decided simply to submit to it, change the reading for the today, and think about why this summons from Paul points to an answer to the question: “Why Involvement in the Life of the Church?”

This phrase comes from near the end of Paul’s life. Paul’s relationship with the Philippians – to whom he wrote it – was close. He had founded the congregation a few years earlier and remained in touch after he had left for another city. When Paul wrote these words to the Philippians, he was in prison, and they had been praying for his release.<sup>1</sup> They had sent one of their own, Epaphroditus, with gifts – likely parchment, cloak, books,<sup>2</sup> and perhaps some personal items – to supply his needs while he was imprisoned.<sup>3</sup> Paul sends Epaphroditus back with the letter we know as the Letter to the Philippians in which these words are found.

The words he wrote are some of the most compelling from Paul’s pen:

*“...work out your own salvation with fear and trembling...”*

*“...for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for [God’s] good pleasure...”*

*“...so that you may be...children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine like stars in the world.”*

What do these words say to us about responsibility for our faith, about involvement in the church? Let’s look at each section of this brief passage.

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<sup>1</sup> Philippians 1:19.

<sup>2</sup> In II Timothy 4:13, in what was likely the same imprisonment, likely in Rome, Paul asks Timothy to bring these three particular items.

<sup>3</sup> Philippians 2:25; 4:18).

## I.

“...*work out your own salvation with fear and trembling...*”

“Fear and trembling” are not words we normally use in a *positive* way in our faith, if for no other reason than they call up images of a God who is harsh and vindictive.

But “fear and trembling” is what happens when we get close to something beautiful or frightening or both.

- Every summer when we go to Maine, we stand at the edge of any one of a number of cliffs on the island where we stay. As we look over the cliff at the ocean beneath – waves pounding the rocks – I experience “fear and trembling” at the sight, a lot of fear and trembling, and yet the sight is beautiful in its fearfulness.
- Whenever we find ourselves drawn to another human being – especially for the first or most intense time in our life – even in the midst of passion, we experience the “fear and trembling” that comes with knowing and being known by someone else, with opening ourselves up to the pain and beauty love can bring, with giving ourselves into the life of another and receiving another into our life with few if any boundaries or marks of delineation. In the face of passionate love, we shake with fear and trembling.
- When we hold the infant to whom we have just given birth or for whom we have provided seed, we are overcome at the beauty and mystery of new life, at the way in which we see the image of ourselves or our partner in its face and fingernails, at the vulnerability of this new life to our somewhat seasoned life, to our physical touch, to every move we make, to every decision we will carry out. In the face of such vulnerability, we shake with fear and trembling.

When Paul writes the Philippians to “work out your own salvation in fear and trembling,” he is not asking them to cower in the presence of a God of judgment, but rather to come to realize fully *who they are* in God’s image, who Christ has *redeemed* them to be, who the Spirit is *calling* them to be matters of life – large and small – before them and their world.

“Working out our own salvation in fear and trembling” is a matter for each individual to do. But as we discover who God is and who we are in God, the best way to do “work out our own salvation” is to be *involved* in the life of the church. Singing the hymns. Listening to the sermon. Reading and studying the scripture. Sharing bread and wine. Visiting the sick. Serving at the shelter. Eating Bar B Q on the church lawn and cleaning up the dishes and tables afterward.

Through making ourselves vulnerable in the midst of a coterie of people in whose presence we feel welcome and whose blessing and support we receive, we can “work out our salvation” – our place and role and purpose and promise – *before* the God whose beauty and power leaves us trembling and who often walks with us through those very people in whose presence we have placed ourselves.

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When I was in the ninth grade, I was one of three kids in my church who attended Senior High Sunday School. The teacher was a middle aged man, friend of my parents, who was conscientious and well prepared but of whom I cannot recall much of what he said...except for one Sunday.

I knew that he had a son who was both brilliant and a savant, a tall awkward boy of sixteen who wore thick glasses and was so shy he could hardly talk to people. I knew the son attended a special school in Florida for kids who were like him. When I came home from school one Friday afternoon, my mother had told me that the man's son had drowned that morning on a school outing at the shore. When Sunday came and I was sitting in the Sunday School room, I was surprised when the door opened and the man walked in to teach.

He talked about his son. He talked about his son's life. He talked about how he and his wife had flown to Florida to make arrangements to return the body to Tennessee. He talked about how they hadn't slept for two days. And he talked about how they believed that their son was now with God, as intelligent and brainy as he was on earth, but now relating to people in ways he never could in this life.

A few months later, our English teacher asked us to write an essay on something important we had experienced, and I wrote about that day in Sunday School. Later that spring, the essay was chosen for inclusion in the school literary magazine. It was the first and about only time I have appeared in print.

When I came across the magazine and re-read the article years later, I noticed how formal and stilted the writing was, but I also realized it was through that incident that I learned that I could write, and it was through that incident that I learned that could admire human courage and empathize with grief.

That Sunday morning memory, from the Sunday School of my local church, was part of me working out who I was under God in a way so deep and beautiful it is fair to say it involved nothing less than my salvation and brought me to fear and trembling. And it happened because I was there, present, involved.

## II.

The second phrase from Paul:

*"...for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for [God's] good pleasure..."*

As much as I recognize that I played some part in listening to the teacher that day, empathizing with him, and then being able to write about it, it would be disingenuous for me to say that I had cultivated any of those gifts *on my own*. The truth is, when we play our part in thinking, praying, listening to people close to us, examining who we think God is calling us to be, our part in that effort is *important* but *not primary*. "God is at work in us," Paul says, sometimes directly, sometimes hidden, sometimes in and through the church, sometimes outside the church, but *God is at work*, enabling us both to will and to work toward *God's* good pleasure.

Trying to sort out where our effort ends and God's efforts begin is like trying to separate the blue and yellow that make green. Though like Jesus, we must ultimately walk the "lonesome valley"<sup>4</sup> of "working out our own salvation" *alone*, even when we feel most alone God is "at work in us," enabling us "to will and to work for God's good pleasure."

Again: best done if we are involved in the community of faith, God's church.

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<sup>4</sup> "Jesus Walked This Lonesome Valley," is an undated American Spiritual, available at <http://www.hymntime.com/tch/htm/j/e/s/u/w/jesuwalk.htm>.

### III.

Finally, “...so that you may be... children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine like stars in the world.”

I don't know about you, but I haven't met many people in our city – or for that matter in other cities as well – who would dispute the notion that we in our country seem to have taken on the characteristics of “a crooked and perverse generation.”

We rarely agree on the *source* or *nature* of the manifestation of perversity, but very few of us are Pollyannaish about our national mood, nor about the way we are treating one another across the room or across the world.

Potomac fever is not something we want to catch these days, as each week it seems to creep up another degree or so, to where it will soon threaten to send the body politic into shock. The only fever worth catching around here these days is Nats fever, and it has proven to be “the tie that binds us,” the only thing around which we seem to be able to unite and celebrate; thanks in no small part to the respect being shown most of us by handfuls of fans of the Dodgers or Braves or Phillies or Mets or Cardinals or Cubs or Yankees or Red Sox who seem willing to allow us to enjoy our admission into the club of which they have been members for years.

In our city, in the perversity and crookedness of our day and time, when working out our salvation leads us to courage, to calm, to wisdom, to the genuine desire to understand the viewpoints or emotions of others, and to actions which hold us together as a nation and even as a church, such courage and calm leads us to “shine like stars in the world.” For us as Christians, courage and calm come with working out our salvation, with fear and trembling, for God's good pleasure; a working out which comes so much more naturally if we are involved in the Orange Theory of the church, with peers and trainers, the best music and equipment, rather than working out on the old treadmill in our dusty basement, the washer and dryer in our view, the Walkman attached to our sweatpants, playing the latest 70s music from a cassette tape through earphones that keep falling out of our ears.

### IV.

Why involvement?

Sometimes it is best not to try to go it alone.

Amen.