

The Twenty-eighth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Isaiah 25:6-10A
<i>Response</i>	I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalms 23:1-3A, 3B-4, 5, 6
<i>Second Reading</i>	Philippians 4:12-14, 19-20
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	[T]hat the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you
<i>Gospel</i>	Matthew 22:1-14

The twenty-eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time for Year A brings us to the end of the Church's brief journey through Paul's letter to the Philippians. It is from chapter 4, the end of the letter. It's verses 12-14 and then 19-20. So let's just read these verses together, and then we'll try to unpack them. It's a short text, but there's a lot here. It's rich. In Philippians 4:12, we read these words:

I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound; in any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and want. I can do all things in him who strengthens me.

Yet it was kind of you to share my trouble.

And then if you skip down, it goes down to verse 19:

And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen.¹

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

Okay, what is going on in these words? What's Paul trying to teach the Philippians here? And then through them, what might he teach us?

So in this case, I think I would actually back up just a bit to verse 11. So although the lectionary begins in verse 12, if you look at the verse before, it actually gives you a little bit of context. He says in that verse:

Not that I complain of want; for I have learned, in whatever state I am, to be content.

And then he goes on to say:

I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound; in any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and want.

So the text for today from Paul is another one of these "secrets." It's like a key—a spiritual key—to how to navigate the different circumstances of life that we find ourselves faced with. Now I don't know about you, but if I would have written this, I would have written "I've learned how to face the difficulties of life." I would have just focused on that. But notice, Paul doesn't say that. He says:

I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound; in any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and want.

Okay, so the first thing to notice about this text is Paul seems to think that we don't just need to navigate the difficult times in life, where we face trials. He also thinks we need to know the secret of navigating times of abundance, times of plenty, times of consolation. And you know, that might...it should strike us as a little odd at first, because our natural disposition is, "Well, how do I navigate times of abundance and exaltation? Well, I enjoy them. I lap it up. I have a good time and enjoy myself. And then when the trials come, that's when I need to buckle down and really face things."

But remember, Paul's a Jew, and he would have known the Jewish Scriptures well. And one of things that you'll see when you read through the Jewish Scriptures, when you read through the Old Testament—notice I said “when” you read the Old Testament, not “if”... “when.” When you read the Old Testament, you'll notice that there's often a pattern that you'll see in the history of Israel. This is especially clear in the book of Judges, for example. So the people will find themselves in a time of suffering, and God will rescue them from the suffering. He'll send a deliverer. He'll send a judge. And when that judge comes, he sets the people free. He brings them salvation. And once they're free from whatever the trouble is, they tend to enter into a period of surplus, a period of success. They abound, to use Paul's language here.

And what you'll always notice, over and over again, especially in the book of Judges, is once they enter into that period of surplus, that period of peace or material wealth, material well being—fields are ripe, the trees are full of fruit, everything seems well—they will tend to fall back into sin. They tend to forget about God when things are going well, and this is a pattern over and over again in the book of Judges...and not just Judges, but elsewhere in the history of Israel.

In other words, surplus and plenty, economic well being, physical well being, material wealth—these things are good, but they're dangerous. They're spiritually dangerous, because they can incline us to forget about God. The person who everything seems to be going well in their life, it's easy to fall into the trap of thinking they don't need God. This is why Jesus says in the Gospel:

...it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” (Matthew 19:24)

He's not saying there's anything intrinsically evil about a rich person, but he is saying there is something spiritually deadly about wealth, about surplus. So what Paul is saying here to the Philippians is “I've learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger. I've learned the secret of navigating abundance and want.” And what is that secret?

I can do all things in him who strengthens me. (Philippians 4:13)

Okay, now that's a very famous verse. You'll often see it adapted as "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me"—kind of like a bumper sticker type verse. It's a verse that people love. It resonates with them. They'll take it out of context and use it as a memory verse. And that's fine to use that verse in that way, but it's important for us (if we're going to make that a memory verse) to remember...what's the context here? Paul's not saying I can do anything. It doesn't mean I can do whatever I want, that's for sure. And he also doesn't mean "I can do all things" in the sense of "I am able to do all things," like there are no limits for me. That's not what he's getting at either.

What he's saying is as long as I remain in Him—namely, in Christ—as long as I remain in communion with Christ and I abide in Him, then I can navigate both the spiritual dangers of abundance and exaltation and plenty, as well as the spiritual difficulties of hunger and want and being abased.

And by the way, the word there for "abased" is *tapeinousthai*. It's the same word we saw Paul use for Christ—*tapeinaō* is he Humbled Himself. He lowered Himself. So he's saying, "I've learned the secret of how to be low and how to be high, how to be hungry, how to be full, how to be poor, and how to be rich. The secret is...stay rooted in Christ. I can do all things through him who strengthens me."

So it's only through Christ's grace, through His strength, through His virtue, that we can navigate the dangerous waters and the ups—literally, the ups—and downs. That's what Paul is describing here, the ups and downs of life in Christ.

And again, this is at the risk of using kind of cliché platitudes that are just commonplace. People will often talk about life having peaks and valleys, ups and downs. And that's a platitude because it's true. That's how life is. Again, Paul is saying here that...he's saying, "I've learned the secret of contentment in whatever state I find myself, so whether I'm up or whether I'm down, whether they're going well or whether they're going poorly, whether I'm experiencing consolation or whether I'm experiencing desolation, I don't detach from Christ. I don't stop

praying. I don't stop receiving the sacraments. I don't start to drift away from Him. So the secret of doing all things is to remain in Him who strengthens me.”

So Paul, in other words, attributes his ability to navigate the ups and downs of life to grace and to communion with Christ. And I think that that's actually a powerful, powerful message that Paul's giving to the Church at Philippi, because they're going through difficult times. They're going through suffering. They're facing opposition. We didn't actually cover this in this letter, but in chapter 3—the Church kind of skips over chapter 3 in the lectionary—but Paul is warning them to watch out for the circumcision party, this faction within the Church that is causing a lot of strife, a lot of division, a lot of scandal and confusion...because they're saying circumcision is necessary for salvation. Remember this in the letter to the Galatians or the council of Jerusalem in the book of Acts.

So the Church in Philippi is having difficulties, but Paul wants them to learn not just how to navigate difficulties but also how to navigate abundance as well. Because remember, Philippi is a Roman colony, a very prominent city. It probably had some wealthy and noble people among the believers. And so he's giving them the key to navigating both abundance and want, and it's basically being rooted in Christ. I can do all things *in* Him—not just through Him, but *in* Him who strengthens me.

And this is a standard idea in Paul's letters. It's the idea of the mystical Body of Christ. It's something distinctive in Paul. Only Paul uses the phrase “the Body of Christ” to describe the Church. This is his unique contribution to the theology of the Church and theology of the spiritual life...is that we're not just believers *in* Christ. We are members of Christ. And so remaining in communion with Christ in Him is the secret to being content no matter what the circumstances—no matter what state we find ourselves in.

So short passage for today, but I'd like to close with a little insight from the living tradition. For me, I see this most clearly expressed—what Paul is saying here, the principle he's laying out here—in a famous passage from one of my favorite saints, St. Ignatius of Loyola. Some of you are probably very familiar with *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius* (of Loyola). If you've ever made a Manresa retreat or

done the exercises in whatever form, you'll be familiar with the first principle and foundation.

At the beginning of the spiritual exercises, Ignatius gives a principle and foundation for making the exercises and for making progress in the spiritual life. And I want you to just listen to what he's saying in light of what Paul has just said to us in the letter to the Philippians...and the secret of contentment according to Paul. I think Ignatius is giving us similar advice.

So in the first principle and foundation, Ignatius of Loyola says this:

Man is created to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord, and by this means to save his soul. The other things on the face of the earth are created for man to help him in attaining the end for which he is created... Therefore, we must make ourselves indifferent to all created things, as far as we are allowed free choice and are not under any prohibition. Consequently, as far as we are concerned, we should not prefer health to sickness, riches to poverty, honor to dishonor, a long life to a short life... Our one desire and choice should be what is more conducive to the end for which we are created.²

That's number 23 of the *Spiritual Exercises*. Now I'll never forget the first time I read this. It was actually on an Ignatian retreat. I remember thinking, "Wait, wait, what are you talking about Ignatius? Of course I prefer health, I prefer riches to poverty, I prefer honor to dishonor, I prefer a long life to a short life. Why wouldn't I prefer those things? And what do you mean by being indifferent? Does that mean that I just shouldn't care about it?"

But that's not really what Ignatius is talking about. When he talks about indifference, he's talking about an interior detachment from the things of this world, for created realities—whatever they might be, whether good or bad, from circumstances that are good or bad. He's trying to basically lead the people making the exercises (these writings are for) to a holy detachment from created things,

² Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, no. 23, First Principle and Foundation; trans. Louis J. Puhl, S.J.

because only in that detachment can true peace be found and true progress be made in the spiritual life.

Because if we do prefer health to sickness, riches to poverty, honor to dishonor, long life to short life, and we start to lose those things—we lose our health, which can happen to any of us at any time. If we lose our possessions, which as we know in South Louisiana where I'm from, it can happen anytime. Every hurricane season, everyone who lives where I'm from has to reckon with the possibility, okay, this year I might lose everything if we get a terrible storm. Honor to dishonor—recognize that we can lose our reputation should someone desire to attack it or maybe lie about us.

All these things are finite created realities that can slip away quickly. So if we aren't indifferent to them, if we are attached to them interiorly, we're going to lose our peace as soon as we lose these created goods. And so Ignatius here, I think, in the principle and foundation, is really reflecting the teaching of Paul in Philippians. He doesn't quote him—I'm not saying that he quotes him, but I think that he's giving the same spiritual principle of how to be at peace, and it's the practice of detachment from the vicissitudes, the changing elements, the changing situations and circumstances of this life.

And of course—and I'll end with one other quote from the tradition from John Chrysostom—we have to recognize at the same time that we don't do this through our own power. As Paul says, I can do all things through Christ, or in Christ, who strengthens me. So this is a peace that passes understanding, because it's really a supernatural gift. It's a gift of grace. And so Chrysostom says, and I end here:

But since boasting might seem to have a place here, see how quickly he checks up, and says, "I can do all things in Christ that strengtheneth me." The success is not mine own, but His who has given me strength.³

John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Philippians*, number 15. So Chrysostom rightly recognizes that as Jesus says to the apostles in John 15:

³ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Philippians* 15, in *NPNF1* 13.250

...apart from me you can do nothing.

So this is not a natural detachment. It's not something that comes to us naturally. Our natural inclination is to want health rather than illness, riches rather than poverty. We want to be up rather than down. But Christ says "apart from me you can do nothing"...and then the opposite of that is that "in me, you can do all things," and that is what Paul is teaching us in Philippians 4 when he gives us the secret of contentment.