1-30/31-21 Courage to be Last Rev. Amy Haines

Phil 2:1-5

During the past year, as families spent more time at home, good old-fashioned board games made a comeback. Some are the classics; some are quirky and new. Some transitioned well to playing over Zoom; some have to be played only in person.

Our eldest son Nathan received two board games for Christmas, for teens can only receive so many gift cards, clothing, tech items or in Nathan’s case, books. Thankfully, my family does fairly well at playing board games together, overall not making a big fuss whether they win or they lose. But think of your household, past or present; think of your own personality—

how competitive are you at board games? Are you one who can play for fun, or do you always have to win? Can your family play games together, or do the games end in tears rather than laughter?

Board games are meant to be fun. But how many people cannot play games for fun? They have to win. They cannot lose.

How many people live life the same way? They have to win. They cannot lose. Second place is last place. If they do not get their way, then everyone is miserable. Life has to be about them,

and they really don’t care about the people around them.

Today, the apostle Paul calls us to a different way of living. Paul calls us to have the courage to be last.

No, being last doesn’t mean deliberately losing every game. Being last doesn’t mean we never try to do our best.

Instead, being last is about thinking of others instead of thinking only about our own needs.

Being last is thinking about the wellbeing of others rather than simply our own comfort. Being last is following the humble ways of Jesus rather than the cutthroat, entitled world around us.

Think of those among our greater community who put the needs of others first. Firefighters who walk into a burning building when everyone else is running out. Our teachers and school staff striving hard to still make education fun and captivating even in a pandemic. Neighbors watching out for neighbors.

When have you had one of those “it’s not about me moments” when you stepped in and assisted someone else without thought to your time, your safety, your needs? Maybe it was at work or on the highway; maybe it was in the parking lot or in your neighborhood; maybe it was with a family member or with a stranger. These are the moments when we share compassion and grace; moments when we don’t think, “What can I get out of this?”; moments when we are more concerned for another rather than ourselves.

If you’ve ever had one of those moments, take heart. You had the courage to be last!

Yet living last is not our human nature. Thinking of others first is not our initial inclination.

Even Jesus’ own disciples argued over who would have the seats of honor in Jesus’ kingdom.

The church today has its share of struggles and divisions, of selfishness and sinfulness. The church isn’t perfect because we aren’t perfect, and never will be.

As our world continues to live by an either/or mentality, that mentality has seeped into the body of Christ. How often do church folk believe that you have to be either for social justice or personal piety, when in reality we are called to both. I know churches where to be a Republican is seen as anti-Christian. I know of churches where to be stand against racial injustice is seen as a threat to the community.

How many people have been turned away from faith in Jesus because God’s people don’t live by God’s love. Rather than find grace, men are judged. Rather than find welcome, women are shunned. Rather than find a place to grow in faith, young people are told not to ask questions.

Rather than find a place to call home, older people feel forgotten.

How many churches are more concerned with who uses what in the kitchen rather than who in their neighborhood goes to bed hungry? How many churches are more concerned with what music they sing rather than who around them has no reason to sing at all? In how many churches have masks become a symbol of politics rather than a symbol of loving one’s neighbor?

We are called to another way. Time and again throughout the New Testament, we are called to another way: Jesus’ way. A way of love and community. A way of welcome and grace. A way of compassion and justice. A way of together bringing a glimpse of the kingdom of God into the here and now.

You and I would not be here today if many generations prior to us did not live by this sacrificial, compassionate, life-giving way.

The last non-Christian emperor of the Roman Empire was Julian, who was a strong critic of the followers of Christ. Julian begrudgingly acknowledged that the Christians, or the “Galileans” as he referred to them, took care of the needy far more so than its pagan counterparts, which led to many new converts. This concerned the emperor because it threatened Julian’s attempt

to restore the supremacy of the Roman pantheon.

In one of his written passage, Julian inadvertently described just how powerful the Church can be when it models the sacrificial love of Christ to its neighbors. He wrote:

“These impious Galileans (Christians) not only feed their own, but ours also; welcoming them with their agape, they attract them, as children are attracted with cakes….Whilst the pagan priests neglect the poor, the hated Galileans devote themselves to works of charity, and by a display of false compassion have established and given effect to their pernicious errors. Such practice is common among them, and causes contempt for our gods ~~(Epistle to Pagan High Priests)~~.

Those in the early church lived in a conflicted but beloved covenant community in peaceful opposition to the militaristic, materialistic, racist, and sexualized culture of the Roman Empire. The church was distinct, noticeable, and uncompromising. This type of prayerful resistance and faithful witness is needed today.”

Adapted from Stuart Strachan, quoting Michael Craven, “The Christian Conquest of Pagan Rome,” Crosswalk.com, 11-8-10

-thepastorsworkshop.com:sacrifice

When Paul wrote his letter to the church in Philippi, he was sitting in a jail cell in Rome, imprisoned because he refused to give up following the way of Jesus. From there he called the church to continue in the way of faith, no matter what struggles would come their way.

For the message of Jesus was and is countercultural. That is why we need to have the courage to live by faith. To have the courage to claim our identity as God’s beloved means that we put our place in God’s family ahead of any other allegiance to country or group. To have the courage to be vulnerable means that we are willing to share our witness even when others don’t want to listen to our story. To have the courage to be gracious means that we are willing to forgive rather than demand retribution. To have the courage to be last means that we are willing to sacrifice self on behalf of the welfare of others.

The good news is, none of this we do alone. First, we are called to live by faith through the power of the Holy Spirit. Second, we can trust God’s promises to be true, including the promise that God is always with us. Finally, our faith is meant to be lived in community, so that together we share with others what we have received from God.

Living in community is a constant blessing—and a constant challenge. We are called to unity, not uniformity. But sometimes our selfish desires and personal convictions get in the way of living together in faith.

When that happens, listen again to Paul’s words today:

“If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, [and there is all of that and more] make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.” (NRSV)

Paul isn’t doubting that we find encouragement, love, compassion and the presence of the Spirit in our midst; Paul is affirming it! And because of all that is available to us, because of all that we have already experienced, he calls us to more.

Paul calls us to have a common focus, a common purpose, a common mindset: to have the same mind as was in Christ.

This common mindset does not negate our differences of opinion or conviction or experience or hope; rather, this common mindset gives us a focus to live out our ministry together as the body of Christ. This mindset puts the way of Christ ahead of any of our selfish desires. This mindset is grounded in prayer, which then leads to intentional living.

Think back to the first disciples. They definitely differed in experience and conviction. Many were fishermen; one was a despised tax collector. Two wanted places of power. One wanted Jesus to physically overturn Rome. One denied that Jesus would ever suffer in his glory. One needed tangible proof to believe. Yet, after Jesus’ death and resurrection, in spite of their differences, all but Judas had a common focus and a common purpose, to proclaim in word and deed the good news of Christ crucified and risen.

Paul invites us to a common mindset and purpose, to live and love like Jesus. As the hymn following these verses reminds us, Jesus lived by humility, obedience, honesty, and self-giving love. As we see throughout the Gospels, Jesus cared not only for those in power but also for the outcast. He cared for men and women. He cared for those who were faithful and those who struggled with faith.

Paul talks about making his joy complete, but consider how the letters of joy can guide us in how we live. Think of Jesus—think of others—think of yourself. In that order. That is how we live the way of Jesus.

Having the courage to put ourselves last is not easy. This way of living is a daily intentional way of caring for others. This way of living is not simply a checklist of service hours or a way to feel good that we have done our part to those not like us. This way of living is constantly remembering that we are together, in community, and as Bishop Palmer likes to say, when one boat rises, all boats rise. This way of living is mutual care and concern within and with the body of Christ.

Ben Patterson shared that his wife, Lauretta, once remarked,

“I know I’d die for Christ.  If I were put in front of a firing squad and commanded to renounce Christ or die, I know I’d say ‘Shoot me!’  That would be easy.  The hard part is *living*for Christ, not dying for him.”

She is right.  One huge, heroic act would be easier than a lifetime of little daily decisions, especially when it may take a lifetime to discover that the promises of God were worth

the no we said to ourselves and to the world each day.

-Taken from *Waiting: Finding Hope When God Seems Silent*by Ben Patterson, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL

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Daily, the choice is ours. How will we live? Who will we live for? Will we be known as a community of faith more for what divides us or because we live with a common focus and mindset that follows Jesus?

St Francis of Assisi once declared:

“Above all the grace and the gifts that Christ gives to his beloved is that of overcoming self.”

**-**-gnjumc.org Breakthrough Initiative Courageous Sermon Series 2021

God yearns for us to love others as we have been loved. God yearns for us to care for others as we are cared for. God yearns for us to follow the way of Jesus, in boldness and courage and community.

May we live into the words of the Great Thanksgiving prior to Holy Communion:

By your spirit, O God,

make us one with Christ,

one with each other,

and one in ministry to all the world.

May it be so. Amen.