

## **Shining Like Stars**

### **Philippians 2:1-15 2Corinthians 4:5-7**

Our series this month: Philippians—Paul’s epistle of joy... warm and affectionate. We’ll hear that tone again, as Paul brings some gentle admonition today.

Last week we looked at Paul’s prayer at the opening of the letter, where he prays that our love would overflow more and more with knowledge and insight. So we can act, even in small ways, with wisdom and with love. Because... as Paul said, God is at work, and has promised that he will continue to be at work in our lives and through our church.

As we look at this morning’s passage, Paul will continue this prayer, in a way, by giving us a picture of what it looks like to shine like stars in the world, from a well-known and beloved text from Phil. 2:1-15.

### **Philippians 2:1-15**

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, 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, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God

as something to be exploited,  
but emptied himself,  
taking the form of a servant,  
being born in human likeness.  
And being found in human form,  
he humbled himself  
and became obedient to the point of death—  
even death on a cross.  
Therefore God also highly exalted him  
and gave him the name  
that is above every name,  
so that at the name of Jesus  
every knee should bend,  
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,  
and every tongue should confess  
that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father.

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.

This is the word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God!**

Well, here is a brilliant and beautiful, poetic ascription of praise to the risen Christ, and a call to have the attitude of Christ, together, which is the attitude of becoming servants, like Christ. Songs have been written based on this, as well as poems and other literature. It's been read at many peoples' weddings. And it

seems like Paul could just end this poetry at verse 11: every knee bowing, every tongue confessing Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God. Ahh... Jesus has done it all—humbled himself, died, risen and exalted. It's all good.

And in light of that, it may make what Paul says afterward seem surprising.

One might think that Paul would say, Jesus has done it all, now rest in that assurance. Bask in it. Receive it and be blessed. But his next word is, "Therefore..." And, as my high school English teacher taught us, whenever there's a 'therefore,' find out what it's *there for*! Which, ironically, is bad grammar; but the point was made. We find out what it's there for because it's a connector; it connects thoughts. And what he says next is: now, based on who Jesus is and what he's done, people of God... shine! What he says is, work out what God has worked into you. Yes, Jesus has done it all. He's at work among us and in us. Now, let's live like it! "Shine like stars in the world," he says in today's text.

As mentioned last week, this is Paul's epistle of joy, and it's his most positive letter, filled with encouragement. With that in mind, this morning we are receiving a reminder, an encouragement, to keep up the good work, to shine like stars in the world, so that the good continues. So we keep working for the good of *all*, to help alleviate poverty and inequality where we can, to be reconcilers and peacemakers as much as we are able, as ways of living out (working out, to use

Paul's words) our witness for Jesus Christ in the world, as shining stars (reminds me of a song by Earth, Wind and Fire...).

Paul reminds us of the example Jesus set, and he invites listeners to imitate Jesus' attitude and example in their witness to the world—that is, of being servants. The example of humility, and service. And I'm drawn to this phrase that he uses at the end of the passage, almost as a concluding summary statement, of shining like stars in the world. Of setting aside the dark so to speak, in favor of shining.

And, based on the tone of positivity that Paul sets at the opening of his letter, we can think of it this way: God calls us to shining, instead of whining. God wants us to be shiners, not whiners. Paul uses a familiar metaphor here, of light.

And of course, we remember that Jesus said, "You are the light of the world... let your light shine" (which is where we get that song, "This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine...")

So, "*shine like stars in the world*" is Paul's way of saying the same thing—you are the light of the world; let your light shine. Be shiners, not whiners (or murmurers—what a great word; the word itself sounds like what murmuring is—sometimes peoples' complaining sounds like "murmur murmur murmur...").

Paul says, “Do all things without murmuring and arguing,” so that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in a hurting, struggling world.

Footnote/parenthetical comment here: notice that “blameless and innocent” and “without blemish” in our passage is not described as perfect sinless behavior. You know, you’ll be blameless and innocent if you don’t sin, keep the 10 commandments and all the other rules, and all that. That is not how Paul understands it. Being blameless and innocent, as he describes it, comes from doing things without murmuring or complaining. It’s almost the exact same language that we heard in last week’s passage, in Philippians 1:9-10: *“I pray that your love would overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight, to help you determine what is best, **so that** in the day of Christ you may be... pure and blameless.”*

Paul doesn’t say, “*stop sinning* so that you may be pure and blameless”, or “don’t make any mistakes so that you may be pure and blameless,” but ‘*overflow with love and wisdom; seek what is best*’ so you may be blameless” and (today) “*do all things without murmuring and complaining* so that... you may be blameless and innocent.”

How do we typically describe being blameless and innocent? Usually, it has to do with not offending God with bad behavior or by saying a bad word or breaking a rule. *Paul's* approach to being blameless and innocent has much more to do with our servant attitude, and our relationships, and our positive light-bearing witness, than about sin management or not messing up.

As we read Philippians, and the rest of the New Testament, and are encouraged to follow the way of Jesus, our efforts are best spent on learning how to love others well, exercising wisdom and discernment, and on shining, in our words and our actions. One of my favorite reminders, to myself, when I get twisted in knots about things is: The best criticism of the bad is the practice of the better.

End of footnote. Getting back to whining...

I'll be the first to admit, whining is so much easier. And so attractive in some ways; complaining can create its own energy. And it often makes me feel better (temporarily, at least)—mostly because it doesn't require me to change anything about myself or my attitude, and I can point a finger at someone or something else as being the problem. And, what bothers me about that, is that it seems all too natural and reflexive. I can go to a whining place pretty quickly and easily, with little effort. And perhaps I'll do it in the name of truth telling. I'm just telling

the truth... about how awful something is, or about what a jerk someone is being. I'm just being honest, right?

Honesty is good, and needed, but there's a big difference between a *whining* kind of honesty, and a *shining* kind of honesty. In *Ephesians* Paul calls the shining type of honesty "speaking the truth in love." He puts it this way, in *Ephesians*, "Let no unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building others up." Dang! But he's so right. A shining type of honesty and truth telling builds up. It edifies. It encourages. And the result is that we all change and grow in love.

And that's the problem with murmuring and complaining. It *doesn't* build up. It *doesn't* encourage. It only distracts, and drags down. It isn't solution oriented.

We are the light of the world, Jesus says. The world needs God's people to be edifying people, who look for ways to speak and act in a positive way. Because, that reflects *God* at work in us and through us (to will and to work for his good pleasure, as Paul says in our text this morning). It's *God's* light that shines. And God is not a whiner. Whining is a reflection of *me*. Shining is a reflection of our gracious God and God's love.

So, how do we live as shining lights? According to our encouragement this morning from *Philippians 2*, we shine by being servants, like Jesus. We shine by

being servants, like Jesus. It's the goal we aim for, and it's the *help we need* because this isn't always easy, learning to be servants.

The reminder here is, "let each of you look not only to your own interests, but to the interests of others." Be humble, as Jesus humbled himself and became a servant.

Being servants like Jesus (shining like stars) means that, with humility, we check our ego at the door, wherever that door may be in our comings and goings. With humility we learn how to be givers and not just consumers. With humility we learn how to understand peoples' needs, we listen to their stories, we walk the second mile, we bless, and love. [Even if people are obnoxious to us. Or perhaps *especially* when they're obnoxious to us.]

Also, being servants means that we learn how to let our light shine in spite of our personal difficulties, even our pain. Or better put, we let our light shine ***through*** our personal difficulties and our pain, like Jesus did. Jesus is called the Suffering Servant, which means he served *through* suffering—or pain, or cross-bearing, or whatever we want to call it. That's a comfort because it means that Jesus was, and is, not immune to the difficulties and pain of human life.

All of us carry pain of some kind—physical, and/or emotional—and it may seem like this little light of mine, I just can't seem to let it shine as brightly as I

want, or in the way I want. We struggle to let the light out. And it's in those times, when we allow the Spirit of God to take us on a journey of restoration and healing, over time, that the light shines.

Sometimes the healing and restoring process *is* the light. As we heard in the reading from 2Cor.4: "We have this treasure in earthen vessels (in other words, frail and human) to show that this extraordinary power comes from God and not from us." God's power is made manifest in our weakness, Paul says. In our humanity—as earthen vessels—we will have weaknesses and struggles and pain, and failures. And God's healing and restoring process in our life is part of the treasure we carry.

So, don't be afraid to let God heal you, and let your light shine in spite of your pain, and even *through* your pain. Because sometimes our weakness, our brokenness, when given to God for healing, *becomes* the light, because it is God who shines through it, as we seek God in it, and as we allow God to take us on a journey of healing and restoration.

Pain hurts (obviously) but it can also be a great teacher. And, in the mystery of God's will and ways, God transforms it, and it becomes a light, a witness to others, when given to God. Nothing goes to waste in God's economy,

especially from our personal experience. And, the good news is: the Suffering Servant knows what it means to carry pain and let the light shine through it.

God's healing of pain and restoring of lives becomes a witness to others. Because all of the people you and I come into contact with every day carry a burden of some kind, or pain of some kind, whether we see it or not. We can make two safe assumptions about people we meet: they are dearly loved by God; and, they are carrying a burden of some kind, or pain of some kind, even if we don't see it. They're just good at hiding it, like most people are.

And our transparency and openness to God's restoring work in *our* lives can become a sign and symbol of what God can do in *their* life. Of course, we need to be wise and discerning and judicious about what we share and when and where, but as we seek God and pay attention to God at work in our lives, we may be presented with opportunities to become a beacon of hope for others.

I remember a woman I met years ago named Grace. I met Grace when I served as an interim pastor in a military community. Grace lost her husband in midlife from cancer, and lost a son in the war in Afghanistan in the early 2000's. Part of her healing process involved attending a grief group and receiving care from her church community, among other things. And at one point in her healing process, she decided to start writing letters—old fashioned hand-written letters—

to people she described as “lonely” people: widows and widowers she knew, elderly in nursing facilities, and other parents who had lost sons and daughters in the military. She wrote to offer them encouragement, friendship, and hope—and prayer. Then she said she started writing thank you letters to people who she saw serving the community in some way—from elected people to volunteers in places like shelters and food banks, to school teachers to nursing home staff. She said it helped her as much as she hoped it helped them. It was one way, she said, that she could let her light shine. And, she developed some pen pals from that.

The first church I served out of seminary as a newly ordained pastor was a wonderful church; yet it was a church that had a history of conflict. It had practically become normal for them; almost like they didn’t know what to do if there *wasn’t* conflict. After being there for about a year I noticed this pattern, where someone had to start an argument so they could feel normal.

Well, at one contentious session meeting two elders were going at it—I think we were simply discussing how much to budget for a certain mission project, and there was some minor disagreement initially, but it had started to become personal. And one of the elders said to the other: “You’re cracked.” And the other elder responded, “I know; but it’s through the cracks that the light shines.” Everyone began to laugh. That was a brilliant, disarming response, and

that bit of humor broke the tension, and it became kind of a joke for a while in the congregation... “You’re cracked...” “I know...”

God calls us to shine like stars in the world; to be beacons of hope in our world. The world needs it; we need it. Friends, you are the light of the world. Let it shine!

Come, Live in the Light