IN LIFE AND IN DEATH WE BELONG TO GOD

Philippians 1:19-26

After the two largest streams of Presbyterianism in the United States reunited to form the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in 1983, a committee was appointed to draft a confession that would briefly summarize our faith. In our worship services on Sunday evenings last Fall we examined this “Brief Statement of Faith”. A lengthy process of writing and review led to its adoption by the presbyteries in 1991. Like the earliest creeds it is liturgical in style and suitable for use in worship – as we used it in our worship here last Fall. And it begins with these words, “In life and in death we belong to God.”

That’s what Paul wrote to the Christians in Philippi when he wrote, “For to me living is Christ and dying is gain.” That’s what he was talking about when he wrote, “…my desire is to depart and be with Christ for that is far better; but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you.” What Paul is writing about is what we say in our Brief Statement of Faith. We say….

“In life…we belong to God.” Paul writes, “Living is Christ.” Paul writes, “to remain in the flesh is necessary…”. We say….

“In….. death we belong to God.” Paul writes, “Dying is gain.” Paul writes, “My desire is to depart and be with Christ.”

You and I live in two worlds. We live in the kingdom of this world, the world of needs in which we need food and shelter and clothes and health care and love. And we live in the kingdom of God, a kingdom filled with the blessings of God and with the joy of knowing we are loved and forgiven and blessed. And in both of these kingdoms we belong to God. In both of these kingdoms God is with us – and God will be with us when we leave this earthly kingdom and enter into the eternal kingdom of God. This is the truth Paul believed and shared with the Christians in Philippi. This is the truth I believe and share with you.

When I was serving the Unity Presbyterian Church in Woodleaf, NC in the 1980s I would go once a month to one of the nursing homes in Salisbury to lead a worship service there. We would sing a couple old, familiar hymns –a Capella – to begin our worship. Margarite Bailey found out I was doing this, and offered to come each time and play the piano. And she did – until she had a stroke – and then became a resident of that nursing home – with limited ability to speak and limited mobility – and the loss of the ability to play the piano. I visited with her often – and in her special way she talked about belonging to God “in life and in death”. She knew that death would soon come – she also knew that she had lived a wonderful life filled with the blessings of God. She knew that God had been with her throughout her life – she knew God would be with her when she made her transition from this life to life eternal. I was with her the night she made that transition – it was the first time I had been with one of God’s children in that moment when life on earth ends and life in God’s eternal kingdom begins. And Margarite Bailey taught me so much that night in the way she made that transition – with no fear – with complete faith. She would have loved to have lived longer to see her grandchildren grow. She would have loved to have become healthy again – healthy enough to play with those grandchildren – and play the piano again. But she knew that was not going to happen. She had lived with Christ – now she was ready to die in Christ – because she knew that she would be with Christ forever. What a blessing it was for me to be with her in that moment.
Christian Wiman wrote these words in his book “One Time”, “I do not know how to come closer to God except by standing where a world is ending for one human being.” As Christians we can say that because we know that in life, and in death, and in that moment when one becomes the other – God is with us – we belong to God.

I attend the Festival of Homiletics in Denver this past week and one of the preachers there was Dr. Walter Bruggemann, Professor Emeritus of Old Testament, Columbia Theological Seminary and one of the greatest biblical scholars and preachers of the last half century. Dr. Bruggemann was talking about the “fidelity of God” – the faithfulness of God in a world where so many things are “here and gone” – where relationships seem to change moment by moment – where people look for certitude in all the wrong places. Then he said, “What do you want at the time of death? I want someone to hold my hand and speak my name. And I want to know that God is faithful – and will be there when I take that final breath. That’s what Paul is teaching the Philippians through his discussion of living and dying in Christ. He’s telling them of his firm conviction that God is faithful – and will be with him – with them – in death – even as God is with them in life.

Hear this story....

“She found herself sitting in a large auditorium with a stage down in front. She was aware of others in the room with her, but she didn’t look around. She seemed to be there for some reason, but she wasn’t quite sure what it was. A door at the front opened. A man walked in and stood there. They all looked at him. He appeared disoriented. He glanced up at them and then looked back at the door from which he had entered. He took a step forward and looked around as though someone should be there to tell him what to do. Apparently he wasn’t sure why he was there either. The he changed: He straightened himself up, looked directly at them, and walked to the front of the stage.

Even though she had seen him for the first time only a moment before, it was as if everything about him was different – like he had grown up all of a sudden. Now he appeared to know exactly where he was, and strength and confidence replaced the confusion and uncertainty of the moment before. With comforting self-assurance that commanded their attention he declared with joy,

*We are going to sing. We are going to sing with One Voice. We are going to sing all together. The same notes with One Voice. We are going to sing beautifully with One Voice all together.*

He paused a moment, smiled, and then added, “And when you find the One Voice that is your Own Voice, it will be time for you to leave.”

With that he began to sing. At first it was just a note. He held the pitch there for the group to find, waited until everyone got it just right, and then added another. The second note was a perfect complement to the first. Soon there were many notes. Each note was just the right one to follow the note before and lead into the one to come. Together they sang simple, joyful songs. They were One Voice, all together, and it was beautiful.

Soon however, slowly, and only one or two at a time, people began to add more. Someone added a note of harmony, another a descant to the melody. And even though each new note seemed just as right as all the others, and only made the singing that much more beautiful, when it happened the song leader always stopped them. It was easy to spot the ones who had found their Own Voice. They were different, but she couldn’t quite describe how. She always felt a little sorry for them as they got up out of their seat and walked through the door in the front of the room. Oddly though, they didn’t seem to feel sorry for themselves.
Then one day as they were singing one of her favorite songs with One Voice all together, she began to hear a new and different sound. At first it was inside her head, a few notes that seemed the perfect accompaniment to the notes everyone else was singing. Then they were a whisper under her breath, and before she could catch herself she was singing! Loudly! Happily! A new and yet oddly familiar melody! The One Voice that was her Own Voice!

She felt everyone’s eyes on her, especially his, the gaze of the song leader. She expected to see displeasure in his face. Instead it looked as if he were smiling, and she wondered why she hadn’t noticed that before. She knew there would be no arguing and no other choice to be made; but truly, she didn’t want to argue and, surprisingly, there was no other choice she wanted to make. She got up out of her seat, walked to the one door at the front of the room and slipped through it.

For the next few minutes she was somewhat disoriented. She found herself in front of a room full of people. They were looking at her as if she were supposed to tell them why they were there. As she wondered what to do, she looked up and shuffled her feet, frantically hoping that someone would step up and tell her what was to happen next. Then she changed. It was like she grew up all of a sudden. She sensed that everything about her was different than it had been the moment before. Now she knew exactly why she was there, and strength and confidence replaced her confusion and uncertainty. With a comforting self-assurance that commanded their attention she declared with joy,

We are going to sing. We are going to sing with One Voice. We are going to sing all together. The same notes with One Voice. We are going to sing beautifully with One Voice, all together.

She paused a moment, smiled, and then added, “And when you find the One Voice that is your Own Voice, it will be time for you to leave.” Then she began to sing.”

I’m not sure exactly what that story written by David Griebner means. I have read it many times – to myself and to others – and each time it means something different. Tonight – as we focus on Paul’s words of the joy he finds in living in Christ – and the joy he anticipates in dying in Christ and going to be with God – tonight I think it has something to do with the song that God places in each of our hearts – the joy we can find in the community of faith here on earth as we all sing and fellowship and worship and work together – the song that we will one day sing with the whole heavenly host around the throne of God, “Holy, holy, holy, Lord God almighty”. It will be our song, our Own Voice joined with the angels and archangels and saints and whole cloud of witnesses singing with One Voice – the voice of eternal praise of God. For as in life – so it will be in death – we belong to God.

Let’s pray..... God of life abundant and God of life eternal, we give thanks that we belong to you. We give thanks that your love surrounds us here, as your love will surround us in your eternal kingdom. We give thanks that we need not fear death, for all that lies beyond will be lived with you. Thanks be to God. Amen.