*in the Lord by my imprisonment, dare to speak the word with greater boldness and without fear*” (v. 14). Paul’s courage and confidence inspired others to speak with courage and confidence.

“*I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith*,” writes Paul, “*so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again*” (vv. 25-26). If Paul lives, he wants to be useful to the churches in their work of spreading the good news of Jesus. At the same time, he is not afraid for his life to end.

“Paul’s own afflictions,” writes Professor Morna Hooker, are not described in a negative way. Instead, they “are seen as an opportunity for the gospel: People talk about his case; therefore, they learn about the Christian faith, and other Christians are encouraged to make a similar stand.” Faced with an ending, Paul becomes stronger, more focused, more productive, and more positive. When Paul looks death in the face, he sees new life.

We can take comfort from Paul’s words, especially in times of struggle and persecution. “Throughout history, persecution has often strengthened the church,” writes Hooker. “The amazing fact that oppression leads to growth reflects the paradox that lies at the heart of the gospel — namely, that God’s power is revealed through the weakness of the cross and that victory comes through apparent defeat.”

Knowing that the end is near, Paul offers some advice to the Christians in Philippi. Live your life “*in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ*,” he writes, “*so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel*” (v. 27).

Living a life worthy of the gospel means always showing the grace and love of Jesus. Paul encourages us to become stronger and more focused, standing firm in one spirit and striving side by side with one purpose. Such strength and unity and focus do not typically happen in good times, however; they usually come during dark and difficult times.

The congregation of Arlington Presbyterian Church (VA) worshiped in a stone sanctuary for more than 80 years. As their numbers dwindled and their aging building became a burden, the people decided not to sell their $10 million property and build a new sanctuary elsewhere, but to take took a bold approach that benefitted the community.

The cost of housing is extremely high in Arlington, VA. Many low- and middle-income families cannot afford to live where they work. So, Arlington Presbyterian joined forces with a nonprofit group that builds affordable housing. The church sold its land to the nonprofit group, and then the group constructed a six-story building on the site of the church, with five floors of affordable housing above retail space on the first floor. Arlington Presbyterian now rents space for worship and other activities in that building.

The transformation of Arlington Presbyterian was not an easy process. The congregation faced opposition both inside and outside the church. Paul’s words to the Philippians provided good advice for them: live in such a way that you are “*in no way intimidated by your opponents*” (v. 28). The congregation “risked it all for the sake of their neighbors,” says Ashley Goff, who became the pastor of the church after the change had begun. “It’s almost like they became curious about death, the curiosity of how to die well.”

Arlington Presbyterian chose new life over death. They let something go to live a life worthy of the Gospel. More than 400 people moved into the building. Arlington Presbyterian is now stronger and more focused, standing firm in one spirit and striving side by side with one purpose. They are experiencing new life after looking death in the face. This, Paul would say, “*is God’s doing*” (v. 28).

Finally, Paul reminds the Philippians that God “*has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well — since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had*” (vv. 29-30). For most of us, the privilege of believing in Christ is easy to accept, and we are happy to receive his forgiveness and new life. But “suffering for him as well”? That is a bit tougher to swallow.

But for Paul, believing and suffering always go together. While it is true that Christ died for us, it is also true that Christians need to die with Christ. “*Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?*” Paul asks the Romans (6:3). “*We suffer with him*,” he says, “*so that we may also be glorified with him*” (8:17). Our Christian faith challenges us to look death in the face, and to end well.

Throughout his life, Jesus willingly to suffered to show love and grace to the people around him. He held nothing back but emptied himself completely. Paul dares us to give of ourselves completely to show the love of Jesus to others. This is a challenge for anyone who wants to be the hands and feet of Jesus in the world. Fortunately, such sacrificial service not only benefits our neighbors, as we feed the hungry, house the homeless, visit prisoners, and welcome strangers; it also benefits us, bringing us into the presence of the One who suffered and died for all.

Suffering and trouble and heartache are a part of this life; but if we bear it well, it can become a glorifying thing. Medieval painters, who lived through multiple plagues, had a curious artistic tradition: *Memento Mori*, which means “Think on death.” In nearly every portrait, the artist would sneak in some small symbol of death, often a skull tucked into a corner. These portraits, commissioned by wealthy merchants (the only ones who could afford a portrait), usually celebrated their wealth and prosperity. Yet, the artistic tradition of *Memento Mori* reminded them of the fate that awaits us all, and of the importance of living this life well.

Covid-19 is like a small *Memento Mori* inserted into the corner of our lives. It is the little skull warning us to “Think on Death” and remember what is truly important about living. The pandemic affords us the opportunity to stop and take stock, to jettison those things that are unimportant and to focus on what really matters. The way we worship in the future will undoubtedly look different than it did pre-pandemic. How we “do” church will be different now. The world’s needs are changing, and the church will need to alter its ministries to address these new needs. And that may be a good thing!

As some things change or end, we may see a resurgence in our energy and enthusiasm, and in the effectiveness in ministry. When we accept that some things must end, we join Paul in becoming stronger and more focused, more productive, and more positive, as well as closer to Jesus Christ.

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**Memento Mori**

Sunday, September 20, 2020 Philippians 1:21-30

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

When we experience something good, we hate for them to end. Maybe it is a good book. Or a movie. Or a meal. Or a sporting event. Or a vacation. When we experience truly great things, we do not want them to end. But research reveals that we need for things to end. Faced with an ending, we become stronger, more focused, more productive, and more positive. A study of more than 3,000 professional soccer games revealed that 23 percent of goals came in the final 15 minutes of the match. The end of the game focused and motivated players to summon their strength for a final push. Likewise, in business, deadlines inspire deal-making. An analysis of bargaining experiences found that 41 percent of deals are struck in the final 30 seconds. Endings are important.

What about the end of life? Blog posts by terminally ill patients use language that is much more positive than the language used by people who are farther from death. The same is true for the last words of death-row inmates. One study looked at hospice workers and found that exposure to death causes them to “live in the present, cultivate a spiritual life and reflect deeply on the continuity of life.” People who have near-death experiences report an increased sense of spiritual well-being. So, as we come to the end of life, we might think that we will hate for it to end; but the reality is that we need for it to end.

In his letter to the Philippians, the apostle Paul offers a surprising perspective on the end of his earthly life. “*For to me*,” he says, “*living is Christ and dying is gain*” (1:21). He knows that his ongoing life on earth means “*fruitful labor*” for the Philippians and for him, but at the same time he admits that his “*desire is to depart and be with Christ*” (vv. 22-24). Paul writes from prison in Rome, where he awaits trial for his work as a Christian missionary. Paul senses that the end is near. Part of him wants his life on earth to end so that he can be with Christ and share in the resurrection life.

Yet, Paul describes his situation in remarkably positive language: “*I want you to know that what has happened to me has actually helped to spread the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to everyone else that my imprisonment is for Christ*” (vv. 12-13). Paul’s imprisonment is the reason the good news of Jesus is spreading throughout Rome. He says, “*most of the brothers and sisters, having been made confident*