

*Re-membered into new life*  
*Philippians 1:1–18a*

I've been thinking about Paul's defended self. Reading this letter to the Philippian church after having witnessed his conversion just a few weeks ago, is revealing. With the events of Paul's life from the past few weeks fresh in our memory, his humanity is present as we read this letter full of so much grace. To use Betty Pries' "architecture of selfhood," we see and hear Paul's descriptive, his deeper, and his defended selves permeating this letter. Seeing the fullness of Paul's humanity lets us hear this letter in new ways. Listening through the layers of "selfhood" lets us hear this letter as though it's written for us.

This week, each time I read through the letter, I found myself more and more curious about Paul's defended self. His words are coming from his deeper self, his converted, transformed self. But what was happening on Paul's insides? What were the words in his insides? What were the voices in his head saying?

In times of stress, our defended selves get very chatty. And loud. And gossipy. They're almost always super harsh and critical, of ourselves and others. They accuse. They can be relentless. And here is Paul, in prison...again. A time of stress. We can easily imagine those voices clamoring for his attention, accusing him, sentencing him: "You deserve to be here. This is your punishment for all the people you murdered. What on earth could you possibly have to say to the Philippian fellowship?" It's not hard to imagine his temptation to wallow in shame and guilt. Because the truth is, Paul did a lot of harm in the world. The injuries and scars and grief of his violence are visible in the lives of those who loved the people he killed.

How did Paul keep from getting buried by shame and guilt and regret?

Yet we read this letter...this tender and joy-filled and gracious and encouraging letter...when we read this letter with Paul's defended self in mind, we get a fuller sense of how profound and powerful Paul's encounter with the Resurrected Jesus was. We get a

sense of the ongoing and daily conversion from that encounter. In his words to the fellowship in Philippians we hear him speaking from his deeper self, his deepest self, transformed self. And we know...we know because we're human beings just like Paul is a human being...we know that it takes a lot of practice to trust the Holy Spirit...to trust the resurrecting power of the Living God...rather than trusting the voices in our heads.

Paul is writing to this relatively new church in Philippi. And from the stories in Acts, we know that as soon as a community of faith forms, conflicts and hardship follow. And this Philippian fellowship is no exception. In vv 29–30 Paul indicates that he knows they're struggling. And Paul, from his own struggles, is writing to them, letting them know they're not alone, reminding them that the Resurrected Christ is with them, encouraging them to trust the Living God.

Paul begins his letter: "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." With this greeting he's remembering and re-presenting the Resurrected Victim. When the Philippians hear this greeting, they too remember and re-present the Resurrected Jesus entering into the locked room and hearts of the disciples, opening his nail-scarred hands, offering grace and "Peace to you." With this greeting we get a sense, a glimpse of how it is that Paul, having done so much harm in his past, is able to write this gracious, loving, and encouraging letter. We see that, rather than listening to the voices in his head, the ones that want to accuse and shame him, Paul is listening to the voice of the Resurrected Christ, "Peace to you." Paul is listening, not to the voices in his head, but listening for and hearing the voice of the Resurrected Jesus, "Peace to you." And Paul keeps his eyes on the Resurrected Victim, on the scarred hands, the scarred, open hands, the embodiment of grace and mercy extended, of love and forgiveness offered.

And it is here that we see the glory of grace. In economic language, Paul has a huge debt. He killed people. His debt is massive, one he cannot possibly repay. But when the Resurrected Victim stopped Paul on the Damascus Road, rather than demanding repayment, the Resurrected Jesus extended grace. He opened his wounded hands, showing Paul his wounds. He told Paul the truth. And even as he told Paul the truth of what Paul was doing, the truth of Paul's sins, his language and being was the language of love and grace and forgiveness. Paul was converted...he was transformed...re-membered by the power of God's grace and love. The absence of accusation and shame is almost unbearable. Our own impulses to blame and shame are so strong that it is hard, nearly unbearable, to hear, let alone receive such a gift, such love, such grace.

Many of us have been formed by harsh economies. Economies and theologies that demand payment for wrongdoing, that say our sins have to be punished and paid for. In this harsh economy and theology, the price of unpaid debts is hell. So we heap accusations on ourselves and others somehow thinking that will pay our debts. Yet shame and guilt run through our bloodstreams.

And then we meet the Resurrected Jesus. And we find ourselves in an economy of grace. An economy of mercy and forgiveness and gratuitous love. In the economics of resurrection, there is no struggle, there is no conflict, there is no sin that will keep us from the Resurrected Christ. And when we are in the presence of the Christ, we are always...always greeted with grace and "Peace."

To be sure, the peace of the Resurrected Christ isn't a shallow or superficial or easy peace; the peace of Christ is a sturdy, robust, profound peace. A peace that is present *in the midst* of struggle. It is a peace that is deeper than our immediate circumstances. A peace that stays, even when we stray. The peace of Christ is a peace filled with so much grace and so

much love and forgiveness that it has the power to stay, to permeate, and to transform every struggle, any sin, all brokenness.

The peace of the Resurrected Jesus sees and tells the truth...never to shame or accuse or punish or collect a debt. But the Resurrected Christ reveals the truth to us so that we can be free. "The truth will set you free." And in that freedom, the gratuity and glory and eternity of God's love and grace for us can be fully experienced and realized...fully experienced and realized if we can bear to receive it and let it in. And from within the glory of God's grace, we find a freedom to be with harm and the wrong we have done. Within the grace and peace of the Resurrected Christ, we can be accountable and take responsibility for hurts and harming we've been part of. And we can do so with grace and love.

This is what we witness in Paul's letter. Paul is the recipient of the peace of Christ and he is free to stand in the glory of God's grace! Listen again to these words that he writes while sitting in prison:

- I thank my God every time I remember you...praying *with joy* in every one of my prayers for you....
- I am confident that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion....
- all of you share in God's grace with me
- I pray that your love may abound more and more....
- Know, beloved, that the things *which happened* to me have actually turned out for the furtherance of the gospel....

Such grace and peace! And then we get to v 15. And it's almost more that we can believe or trust. Listen again:

Some proclaim Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from goodwill. These proclaim Christ out of love, knowing that I have been put here for the defense of the gospel; the others proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but intending to increase my suffering in my imprisonment. What does it matter? Just this, that Christ is proclaimed in every way, whether out of false motives or true; and in that I rejoice.

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Now, I don't think Paul is saying that we shouldn't or don't need to take responsibility for our intentions and our actions. What I hear him writing to the Philippians is that the transforming aliveness and grace and peace of the Resurrected Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the Living God is so powerful and durable that God is at work in us and through us, whether we're "right" or "wrong." No matter *our* intentions or actions, God is present, creating life and aliveness, resurrection life and aliveness, re-membling us into new life.

The invitation for those in Philippi and for us is to listen for the grace and peace of the Resurrected Jesus. And to stand in the presence of the Resurrected Christ, experiencing the grace and peace that Christ embodies. And to let the Holy Spirit breathe that same grace and peace into us, filling us, until we overflow. The grace and peace of Christ isn't magic. It won't fix our struggles or circumstances. Paul was still in prison and the Philippians were still struggling. But it changes everything. Standing with the Resurrected Jesus, standing in the presence of grace and peace, changes everything.

Instead of shame and guilt... grace and peace.

Instead of accusation and blame... grace and peace.

Instead of distress and despair... grace and peace.

Staying in the presence of the Resurrected Victim changes how we experience our lives.

Staying in the presence of the Resurrected Victim changes how we experience our relationships.

Staying in the presence of the Resurrected Victim changes how we experience ourselves.

May we listen for the voice of the Resurrected Christ speaking grace and peace.

May we trust the grace and peace of the Resurrected Jesus.

May it be so.