

Stand Together**Philippians 1:21-30****Sunday, October 4, 2020, 9:00 am****Beargrass Christian Church****I. INTRODUCTION.**

- A. First, I want to express deep gratitude for our children.
 - 1. They led a very meaningful service on Children’s Sunday.
 - 2. If you didn’t see it, please go to our website and check it out.
- B. Next, let’s remember where we have been and where we are going.
 - 1. We made our way through the middle of the Gospel of Matthew during the summer.
 - 2. Today I am coming down the home stretch as I share my final series of sermons before my retirement October 31.
 - 3. And I have already picked out my mask for that final day!
- C. It seems appropriate to turn to Paul’s letter to the Philippians.
 - 1. The letter is thought to be one of his last and he offers many significant reflections on his ministry that remain relevant today.
 - 2. We will be urged to stand, serve, strive, and rejoice together!
 - 3. And I will be weaving in some of my own retirement reflections.
- D. Some of those memories are related to returning from vacations or continuing education events or sabbaticals.
 - 1. After one vacation I checked in with a church member.
 - 2. One of my colleagues accepted the assignment to preach.
 - 3. The church member said, “Well, he gave a really dull sermon—there wasn’t any substance to it—most of the folks fell asleep.”
 - 4. I thanked her and checked in with my colleague.
 - 5. I asked, “How did things go while I was gone?”
 - 6. He said, “Great! But I didn’t have time to put together a sermon, so I looked around your office and used one of yours!”
- E. After a sabbatical break, the board chair dropped by.
 - 1. She said, “I have some good news to share with you.”
 - 2. “First, attendance rose dramatically the past three months.”
 - 3. “The Board voted to send you a welcome-back card—it passed—40 to 39.”
 - 4. “And the Ministry Leadership Team liked the way you wrote up your job description before you went on sabbatical.”
 - 5. “In fact, they were so inspired by it that they formed a search committee to find somebody capable of filling the position!”
- F. None of that happened—but I am thankful that our church family sees the need for its pastors to take time to recharge our batteries—it is great to have Dr. Lowe back today!
 - 1. One of my most meaningful sabbatical experiences was to spend a week at Christmount in Black Mountain, North Carolina.
 - 2. Black Mountain is North Carolina’s version of Mt. Sinai.
 - 3. The Presbyterian’s Montreat Center, the YMCA Blue Ridge Assembly, and the Graham’s “holy land” are all there.
 - 4. I spent time outdoors enjoying the wonders of God’s creation—and the time I spent indoors wasn’t bad either!

- a. Well-respected preacher, professor, scholar, and teacher of preachers, Dr. Fred Craddock, led a study of Philippians.
- b. Dr. Craddock was my most influential preaching mentor.
- c. Besides reading his books and listening to lectures, I had the privilege of taking classes from him during my Doctor of Ministry program.
5. And some of you were here when he preached to a packed-out sanctuary in 1996 for a nationally televised service.
6. I had not officially started, but the church family flew me from Waco to Louisville to participate and preside at the communion table.
7. We have come full circle—who knew that I would begin and end my time here as a televangelist—from Craddock to COVID!

II. NOW LET'S FLIP TO PHILIPPIANS.

- A. Let's think about the context and background for the letter.
- B. The letter to the Philippians is generally a positive Apostle's epistle—despite the fact that it is written from prison.
 1. The first chapter begins with a typical greeting.
 2. Then it moves into a thanksgiving message for the Philippians.
 3. Then there is a prayer, comments about his jail time, and concern about a potential crisis in the Philippian church.
- C. Paul is in prison—but he seems to be making the most of it.
 1. In fact, he believes that it is helping him spread the Gospel.
 2. He begins to consider the consequences related to his future.
 3. If he is executed, news of his death would go viral and the believers could talk about his faithfulness to the Gospel.
- D. But if that doesn't happen, he also believes that living "is" Christ.
 1. Notice that he doesn't say "in Christ" or "with Christ."
 2. He feels that he is so immersed in the Gospel and in the mind of Jesus that for him to be alive "is" Christ.
- E. He has a strong spiritual connection to the Philippians.
 1. Paul exhorts them: "Stand firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind—for the faith of the Gospel."
 2. Although these words were written long ago and far away, pretend that you are a member of First Church, Philippi.
 3. Some complain about these quaran-times and social distancing now—can you imagine if your founding pastor was in jail?
 4. What if Susan, Steven, Rob, or I had been thrown into prison because we were out preaching or protesting?
- F. A cartoon depicts a well-dressed pastor in a comfortable chair.
 1. The caption reads: "Pastor Smith suddenly realizes that wherever Paul went, there was either a riot or a revival."
 2. "Wherever he goes, they serve Starbucks and scones."
- G. Here is a creative Craddockian paraphrase of today's text.
 1. "Get your mind off me—I am not the center of the church."
 - a. "I am prepared if I live—and I am prepared if I die."
 - b. "With all I have gone through with this aching body, I would be glad to be free of it and have angels take me to my rest."

2. "But I think God has a lot more for me to do, so I will probably return to work with you someday; in fact, I'm confident of it."
 - a. "Until that time comes, quit thinking about me."
 - b. "No church can survive built around the preacher."
 - c. "The church is built around Jesus."
 - d. "I am the one in prison; Jesus is not in prison."
 - e. "He is the Savior and foundation of the church."
 - f. "Preachers will come and go—young ones and old ones, good ones and bad ones—but the church is the church."
3. "I want you people to prove all the prophets of doom wrong."
 - a. "Prove that they are wrong when they say, 'The attendance will go down now that Paul's not here.'"
 - b. "Prove that they are wrong when they say, 'The offerings are going to decline now that Paul is not here.'"
 - c. "Prove them wrong when they say, 'I think the members will kind of drift off now that Paul's not here.'"
 - d. "Prove them wrong—stay together—stand together."

III. **THESE WORDS ARE STILL GOOD WORDS.**

- A. "Stand together, stand firm in the Spirit, stand side by side."
- B. We know of examples outside and inside of the church.
- C. Before football season returned, some of us tried to cope by watching some of the classic sports and football films.
 1. I watched "Remember the Titans" again...and again.
 2. It is based on a true story of two coaches, one white and one black, who are asked to coach a newly integrated team.
 3. The head coach, played by Denzel Washington, tries to get the team to forget their differences and focus on their common goal.
 4. They do, they change, and they begin to play good football.
 5. And this change affects an entire town—they stand together.
- D. We see it happen with marvelous musicians.
 1. The director of the U of L Marching Band is a church member.
 2. I can't even chew gum and walk at the same time.
 3. But she is able to coordinate a couple of hundred students to do amazing things.
 4. They all take on the mind of their director, who has a vision of excellence and precision and teamwork.
 5. Imagine what would happen with the marching band if a few folks just decided to do their own thing!
- E. We are seeing it in our city and other places where people are courageously coming together to stand for what is right and just.
 1. The debate last Tuesday was terribly disappointing and divisive.
 2. And now we are reminded that COVID is an equal opportunity infector—so we pray for the health and healing of our leaders and anyone struggling with the disease.
 3. And we long for leaders at all levels who put the people of the community, commonwealth, and country ahead of personal gain.
 4. What a daunting task we all have before us!
 5. Can we bring a deeply divided and conflicted people together?

- F. We mourn the passing of Justice Ginsberg, who showed us that we can be great friends with those who have very different opinions.
1. And whether we agreed or disagreed with her decisions and dissents, we can all learn a lot from her about civil discourse.
 2. Her light and life and legacy will live on.
 3. She said: "I am a very strong believer in listening and learning from others—you can disagree without being disagreeable."
 - a. "Emotions like anger and envy zap energy and waste time."
 - b. "Fight for the things that you care about—but do it in a way that will lead others to join you."
 - c. "Real change, enduring change, happens one step at a time."
- G. So, we continue to pray and work for peace and the common good.
- H. And we are in the midst of many significant changes here—transitions with staff and new possibilities for ministry.
1. This is a very important time for us to stand together.
 2. Many of my most meaningful memories will be our saints—as Paul says, "I thank my God every time I remember you."
 3. I recall conversations with someone who joined in 1949 and served the church faithfully and well in a variety of capacities.
 4. But one thing I really respected about him was his commitment to the church—even when he had a different opinion.
 5. He would take me to lunch and tell me, "Leigh, I don't want to hurt your feelings, but I don't agree with what we're doing."
 6. "But I also want you to know that since the majority of the church wants this to happen, I will support it too."
 7. And he did—not just with words and actions—but financially.
 8. He knew it was more important to stand together than to get his own way or be divisive—and he offered an excellent example for those who knew him.
- I. In like manner, we come from many backgrounds.
1. We have different preferences, perspectives, and political views.
 2. We are not cookie-cutter Christians or clones with the same theology, social status, or levels of income.
 3. We have freedom—we can let our differences divide us—or we can let our common experience of God's grace unite us.
 4. Our quest for truth will lead us to serious discussions.
 5. But our goal is not to be "right" or to "win."
 6. Our goal is to know God better and to strengthen the Church.
 7. Amazing things happen when Christians stand together at the crossroads of the Holy Spirit and human need!
- J. These words are so appropriate for World Communion Sunday.
1. Today we celebrate with people of faith all over the planet.
 2. We remember Jesus' words around the Table and his prayer.
 3. "I give you a new commandment—that you love each other as I love you."
 4. "O God, I pray that my disciples may all be one, as we are one."
 5. This Table stands for...what we should stand for...together.