

## **Worthy**

Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost

September 21, 2014

Gordon Wiersma

Text:           Philippians 1:21-30

One of the ways this preaching gig works sometimes, at least for me!, is that you rather unexpectedly come across a phrase or a word in a text and you get stuck on it – stuck in a good way – curious, perhaps perplexed, intrigued – and that’s what I end up preaching on! This morning in scripture we heard the epic Exodus narrative continue in the wilderness and listened to an intriguing parable from Jesus – but sorry, I didn’t get stuck on those great stories. What happened for me this week is that I read Philippians 1 and came across this phrase: ‘live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ’ – ‘a manner worthy of the gospel’ – ‘worthy’ – hmm – that’s what I got stuck on: ‘to live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel’ - what does that mean? and it’s that ‘worthy’ word in particular that got me curious, perplexed, intrigued – what’s the story with worthy?

Now I don’t know if that strikes YOU as intriguing at all! – but listen to something of why I got stuck on it, and you can see what resonates with you. I think what catches my attention about this first is that in Christianity, and perhaps in religion in general, there is a persistent theological stream that actually goes like this: ‘we are NOT worthy!’ – right? – you know what I mean. There is a well-worn characterization of human nature that says we are inherently sinful beings who are utterly underserving of God’s love, God’s saving grace. There is nothing we can do to earn, to be worthy of God’s favor, and so for us to receive such love and grace from God in Christ fills us with eternal gratitude, or more like eternal in-debt-itude, really, that God would stoop to love such unworthy ones as us.

Now – I bet that you think that you’ve got me all figured out, and that I am not going to endorse diving into that ‘we are not worthy’ theological stream...and maybe you’re right – but, not entirely. I’m all for a good dose of un-worthiness as part of our faith story: “Amazing grace,

how sweet the sound, that saved a WRETCH like me!” – ever hear that song? – I love that song, and I love that opening line. I can act like a wretch with the best of them, and as Pastor Jill last week quoted her wise mother: ‘there’s nothing wrong with a little guilt’. There is good Reformed theology in proclaiming ‘we are not worthy’ – we do not earn God’s grace, it is an unmerited gift.

I wonder though, where does this unworthiness lead us? Now here’s an odd sermon illustration: being stuck on worthy and unworthy, I kept thinking about ‘Wayne’s World’! – do you know what that is? it’s a skit from Saturday Night Live in the late 1980s - a recurring skit of 2 awkward teens who are doing a self-made cable show. And whenever they happened to have a big star show up (rock n roll stars in particular) -which happened at an unusual frequency for their little show! - they would be so overwhelmed that they would prostrate themselves and cry: ‘we are not worthy! we are not worthy’ – which their guests weren’t quite sure how to handle. Or, if you want a more politically correct example, how about this traditional prayer from the Episcopal liturgy: ‘...we do not trust in our own merit, Lord, for we are not worthy so much as to gather even the crumbs from under your table...’ So whether its Wayne’s world, or Episcopal liturgy (my apologies to our Episcopal friends for linking those 2 examples together) or Reformed theology: ‘we are not worthy’ is a familiar tune to us. But at some point, don’t we need to move on? – ‘we are not worthy, we are not worthy!’ – is that all there is? In an odd way, ‘we are not worthy’ can become its own kind of place to get stuck and stay stuck. Unworthiness has some truth to it – but it’s not a place to wallow, not the place to stay. And, maybe, it’s not even the best place to start.

So then, let’s talk about what Paul talks about, being worthy! – or at least trying to be: a life worthy of the Gospel of Christ! Except – come on – it’s such an obvious dead-end, isn’t? Sorry to get here and then burst the bubble right away, but seriously, as we typically think of ‘worthy’ in the sense of deserving or earning something, I can’t sincerely try to make a case. If we are going to understand ‘worthy’ as Paul saying that we should try to present ourselves as those who have earned something from God, we won’t get anywhere. To do so could on the one hand lead down the rabbit hole of a ‘who is the most worthy contest’, putting together

righteous resumes to one up all the bad people – certainly that has been and is an approach to faith that the church has marketed over the years, I'm just saying I think it's pretty clearly a fruitless approach for all concerned – more about self-righteousness and judgment and less about faithful living.

Or on the other hand perhaps even more insidiousness is that if you think 'worthy' is about earning your way, then you are necessarily trapped into a constant 'worthiness status check' – 'alright, did I do enough yet to be worthy?' 'enough to stay worthy?' 'have I dipped to a dangerously low worthy-level?' 'Who decides when I am worthy enough?' I do have some fine friends here who say they really do think there is a point system for all this, but I'm afraid I just don't see that system working out very well for anyone.

As I've been stuck this week on wondering about worthy, and as I've tried to walk through with you some approaches to not-worthy and worthy, what it's made me realize is that part of what is going on is that we are all often stuck in a certain paradigm about things – about important things like God and life and faith – stuck in a paradigm, a deeply imbedded way of looking at things, that has mostly to do with a kind of equation/transaction view of things. If how you stand with God has to do with what you owe God, or what God has it in for you for, or what God credits you for, or what you have in your account, well then, that shapes very strongly how we view God and ourselves – God is the big unworthy/worthy accountant and you are trying to get the math right. And, interestingly – I think VERY interestingly – with that transactional theology imbedded in us, that is then precisely how we are going to view our interactions with each other and everyone else too – life is one big unworthy/worthy spreadsheet – but one that never quite adds up.

So let's just ask for a moment – seems about time in this sermon that we do – how we might hear 'worthy' in a different paradigm, a different light? And to do so, simply hear it like this: 'a life worthy...of the gospel of Christ' – well, what is the gospel? I would make the rather uncontroversial, but perhaps radical, assertion that the gospel is the story of God who loves the world coming to us in Christ, breaking into the human narrative in a unique way in order to reveal

and give the true life God intends for us. And that it is just that: a narrative in real life – not the completion of a transaction - but a story of God intertwined with the story of God's creation.

Well then, if that is the gospel of Christ, then it would seem that 'worthy' here is given in the sense simply of something that is fitting with, that corresponds to and is reflective of this gospel story – a life worthy of the gospel is a life in which the spirit and substance of God's love and life is present. That's all – which, of course, is everything- because unlike a transaction, it is a calling.

A calling is about living – about your story - to be worthy of the gospel is not about despairing of our unworthiness or proclaiming our righteousness – but a calling to live in the freedom Christ has given to be shaped by and express God's enduring love for us. The calling of the gospel God resides in a place of amazing grace indeed - where we are freed from the power and fear of all that is deadly and diminishing, and where we can fully recognize and receive the gifts that express our humanity. The starting place for 'worthy' is being part of a story that tells of how we are claimed and called in Christ to reflect God's creative love and presence.

As Paul writes in Philippians he is speaking to a church, a community of faith, in a particular place who are trying to live faithfully, day to day. And Paul offers as a touchstone, as a grounding for faithful living, this sense of 'worthy', which is to have the gracious love of God shape the contour of life. And I guess that's what I've been thinking about lately too – with all the big issues going on around us in our world, and wrestling with what to do in the midst of it all, I also see in myself and in others that there are the day to day realities and challenges we face. I see people dealing with illness and pain, with grief and depression, with loss and brokenness , with responsibilities and difficult choices– what does it mean to 'live a life worthy' in those places? I think too often in faith we can get stuck in talking about doing right and wrong, when really what is most relevant to people's lives is the need for guidance, for strength, for compassion, for encouragement. And aren't such things worthy of, reflective of the gospel? In Christ God brings to us the gifts of life that empower us to dwell in the midst of brokenness and need, in the midst of conflict and questions, with faithfulness and perseverance. And it is in that

way that we touch on what too is worthy of the gospel – expressions of generosity and care, of compassion and commitment, of joy and gratitude. That's what I see often day to day in you, in this community of faith – and it's the reality we see day to day around us. I think we have little use for life as a neat and clean transaction or equation – but instead in the midst of life, we are claimed and called to be a people to whom God's Spirit gives the gifts of love and hope, courage and grace in all that we encounter in life – that is worthy of the gospel, witnessing to the gifts of life God brings to each day.

I've been stuck on 'worthy', which makes me want to stick with this: to give up on figuring out who is unworthy or worthy of anything at all (which, if we're honest, is a very difficult thing to give up on!), and instead to have our stories joined with the good news of receiving and sharing God's love and grace in all life brings. That is a life worthy of the gospel of Jesus Christ – thanks be to God. AMEN.