

“Faith Is a Team Sport”

Philemon 4-20 • Colossians 4:2-18

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • October 20, 2019

Charlie Plumb was living the dream. He had graduated from the Naval Academy and had gone on to become an F-4 fighter pilot. He had flown 74 successful combat missions over Vietnam. With only five days before he was going home, he had one more mission to fly. But on that 75th mission Charlie Plumb's Phantom was hit by a surface-to-air missile and he was forced to eject over enemy territory. He was captured as soon as he hit the ground and he spent the next 2,103 days – nearly six years – in an 8 foot by 8 foot cell as a prisoner of war in Vietnam.

Decades later Charlie and his wife were eating in a diner in Kansas City. A man across the room kept looking at him. Finally, the man got up and walked over to Plumb. He said, “You served in Vietnam, right?” Charlie said, “That's right.” The man then said, “You flew fighter jets off of the USS Kitty Hawk.” Again Plumb said, “That's right.” Finally the man said, “You were shot down on your final mission.” At this point Charlie asked him how he knew all this about him. The man reached out and shook Charlie Plumb's hand, leaned in close and said, “I packed your parachute.”

As you can imagine this was a very emotional meeting. Plumb had often wondered about the man who had packed that parachute. He had long given up meeting the nameless, faceless sailor. After meeting him he couldn't sleep that night. He tried to imagine what the man looked like all those years earlier in a sailor's uniform. Plumb said, “I wonder how many times I might have seen him and not even said ‘Good morning, how are you?’ or anything because, you see, I was a fighter pilot and he was just a sailor.”

The reality is that while fighter pilots are the ones on the front line of the mission, they don't do it alone. There are roughly 6,000 crew members aboard an aircraft carrier and every one of them has a part to play in successfully carrying out the mission. Today Charlie Plumb

is a motivational speaker and he asks his audiences, “who's packing YOUR parachute?”

We find that same idea here at the end of Colossians. Paul has written this amazing letter to strengthen the faith of the believers in Colossae who are being led astray by false teachers. He has given us this wonderful theology that Jesus is fully God and that we can be filled with that fullness when we follow Christ. Paul then went on to show how the new life we can have in Christ can give us fullness in our relationships.

Now at the end of the letter Paul shows us how important it is to be surrounded and supported by other believers. In other words, he shows us why we need the church. So who, so to speak, packed Paul's parachute? Most people today, even people who are not followers of Jesus, have at least heard of the Apostle Paul. He has had a huge impact on Christianity. He wrote over one third of the New Testament. He traveled and started churches all over the Mediterranean. But he didn't do it alone and here he mentions some of the people who supported him, especially in prison near the end of his life.

In verse 7 Paul says, “Tychicus will tell you all about my activities.” We don't know a whole lot about Tychicus. He's mentioned only five times in the Bible. What we do know is that Tychicus was converted during Paul's two years in Ephesus, a city on the west coast of modern day Turkey, across the Aegean Sea from Athens, Greece. We also know that he served Paul faithfully for years, going wherever Paul went and suffering whatever Paul suffered. In 2 Corinthians 11, Paul summarizes some of the hardships he went through. He says, “Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship,

through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.” And Tychicus was right there suffering with him.

The other thing we know about Tychicus is that he was Paul’s messenger. His job was to deliver Paul’s letters and to tell the churches about Paul’s situation. It might seem insignificant, serving as Paul’s “errand boy.” But we wouldn’t be able to read these letters, divinely inspired by the Holy Spirit, if they hadn’t been successfully delivered by Tychicus. Someone once said, “the greatest ability in the world is dependability.” That describes Tychicus and it should describe each of us as well. Tychicus served faithfully and humbly and it has changed the world.

Paul also mentions that Onesimus is coming with Tychicus. Onesimus is actually a runaway slave of Philemon, one of the founders of the church in Colossae. Apparently Onesimus was a terrible servant. In Paul’s letter to Philemon that we heard earlier Paul describes him as “useless.” As you read the letter you almost get the sense that Philemon was not all that disappointed that Onesimus was gone. Onesimus had run away and ended up in Rome, hoping to become “lost” in the anonymity of the big city. Instead he ended up “found” by Jesus. The transformation is remarkable. Now Onesimus serves others gladly. Paul refers to him as “our faithful and beloved brother” and says that he is now very useful because he’s a follower of Jesus. That kind of transformation can only be a work of the Holy Spirit.

Paul mentions several others that are supporting him. Luke, who wrote the Gospel of Luke and also Acts, traveled with Paul and served as his physician for years. Epaphras first heard Paul preach while he was in Ephesus with Philemon. They eagerly returned home and founded the church there. When the problem with the false Gnostic teachers got out of hand, Epaphras went to Rome to find Paul and ask him to help. Paul says that Epaphras is “always struggling on your behalf in his prayers, that you may stand mature and fully assured in all

the will of God.” This is a man who loves his church and prays hard for them. These are all people that were packing Paul’s parachute.

But he also mentions people that he’s helping to grow in their faith and ministry. Paul is packing their parachute. People like John Mark, Barnabas’ cousin. Paul and Barnabas had parted company a number of years earlier over Mark’s immaturity. But now they have not only reconciled but Paul is helping Mark to grow as a leader in the faith. He is doing the same for Archippus and for Nympha who is the leader of a church in her house.

So let me ask you: who packs YOUR parachute? Who is it in your life that makes it possible for you to do what you do? Who is investing in your life? And whose parachute are you packing? This is why the church is so important in our lives. Faith is a team sport. None of us can live the life God wants us to live on our own. The Apostle Paul couldn’t do it alone and neither can you. We need each other if we are going to grow in Christ. You and I need people to walk along side me to help me, as Colossians 3:8 says, “put away anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk.” And you and I need those people to help me do what Paul describes in 3:12 as putting on the new self, “compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience...and especially love, which binds everything in perfect harmony.”

So how do we help pack each other’s parachutes? This passage tells us. In verse 2 we’re told to “continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.” Verse 3 goes on to tell us that we need to pray for each other’s opportunities to share what God has done and is doing in our lives. Lots of times we need our church family to help us *see* what God is doing in our lives! Finally, in verse 18 Paul says, “Remember my chains.” You and I can help pack each other’s parachutes by remembering and being present during times of difficulty. Faith is a team sport. So who is packing your parachute? And whose parachute are you packing?

Amen.