For the first 9 years of my life, my dad was an RN in the Navy,
one of our station stops was the huge Philadelphia Naval base.
I've been back a couple of times since growing up.
One of those was in late 2019, when I spread my dad's ashes there.
On another recent trip, we stopped by what is called Boat Row.
Boat Row, which is over 100 to 250 years old
is known for its teams of racing shells.
A racing shell is a long, narrow, and tippy boat.
It is designed for speed and not stability.
Eight rowers sit in a line.
They do not look where they are going,
and someone called the Coxswain calls the rhythm.
Stroke. Stroke.
To have speed and power, every oar must enter
and leave the water at the exact same millisecond.

It's amazing to watch these sleek,
fragile boats cut through the water with such precision.
But watching all of this begs the question…
What happens if one rower decides to do their own thing or rest their arms?
If even one person pulls out of sync,
the boat drags, wobbles, or starts spinning.
If you have ever watched one of these races,
like at the Olympics, victory requires every person
to pull together with equal strength and timing.

And this picture of an eight-person rowing crew
working in absolute, synchronized harmony
to move a racing shell forward is exactly
how Paul looked at the church.
When trials or opposition come,
we cannot survive by paddling alone.
That we must lock oars and move forward together.

As we begin our look at Philippians and Paul's points,
he calls us as followers of Christ to press on.
But you know what the most powerful part of Paul's words is?
He begins this epistle, this letter,
by reminding the believers in Philippi
that he is praying for them—from where? prison.
He prays for them, and by extension,

for us while he is under house arrest, probably not a true prison.
In this week's text, he wrestles with life and death.
That's understandable, perhaps, except
his isn't the usual prison despair,
but an inner debate about the purpose of faith and life.
It's stunning, and it's especially stunning
when we realize that his decision to stay is so
so he can serve others.
It is not his own good that drives him,
but that of the flock that follows him,
including this group from Philippi.

He writes from his personal prison that they motivate him
to live and work for the cause of Christ.
Because of us, those who follow Christ.
What if you found yourself in prison or jail?
Maybe you have, or someone you know has.
Have you ever taken one of those tours
where they put you in a prison cell and close the door?
How did that feel behind bars?
Perhaps feeling hopeless and helpless.

Paul, though, was not contemplating
ending his life in prison, but he was
considering surrendering his ministry and waiting
for the sentence to be pronounced against him,
which would happen and lead to his death in Rome.
No one would have faulted him
for sitting back and worrying about his fate.
No one would have blamed him for being
concerned about the state of his soul
in these perhaps final moments of freedom and life itself.
Instead, he sets himself aside to continue
encouraging the church and building up the body.
So how should we respond to this act of self-sacrifice?

Let's join Paul in his imprisonment
and see the point he is trying to make this week.
For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain.1:21
This is Paul's perspective from prison as a response to his impending death.
To live or to die?

Have you ever had a health scare or
near-death situation, or did it feel like it?
You can begin reflecting on your life,
what you have done or didn't do.
What would you want your loved ones
and friends to know most if you were no longer here?

If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; yet I cannot say which I will choose.

Really Paul?
Maybe you see his religious enthusiasm as impressive,
or maybe, like me, it makes you a little uncomfortable
because it sometimes feels like Paul is just boasting.
It makes you want to ask Paul,
don't you hang on to life more than that?
What kind of principle is dying to gain anyway?

Most of our modern culture is dominated
by countless efforts to make life more gratifying
and fulfilling while eliminating the threat and experience of death.
We tend to admire people who succeed in life
or who live their lives to the fullest.
Few of our role models support the idea that "dying is gain."
So how could the Apostle Paul
make such a statement some 2,000 years ago?
Simple.He was coming to grips with his mortality.
It was only appropriate for Paul to reflect on death
instead of adopting a state of denial.
And he is wrestling with it…

I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better, 1:23

And it is clear that Paul's reflections hinge
on one thing that makes the difference.
And what is that?
Paul is absolutely certain that death
is not a transition into a state of nothing.
Paul does not doubt at all that death is actually
the moment when he will be united with Christ.

Whether in the first century or more recently,

these tests of our faith in the face of impending death
have happened again and again
and to one of my most admired theologians, **Dietrich Bonhoeffer**.
A German pastor imprisoned
after his role in a plot to assassinate Hitler.
He wrote many letters from prison that
became his legacy of living his faith for us.
In the spring of 1945, in his last message before
his execution in a concentration camp,
he demonstrated a similar kind of confidence as Paul:
this is the end, but also the beginning.
I believe in the principle of our Universal Christian brotherhood,
which rises above all national interests,
and that our victory is certain.

Our perspective on death, and our
centeredness on the resurrected Christ,
can make a big difference.
It turns our typical human perspectives on life upside down.
Our attitudes of 'living life to the fullest'
suddenly become questionable.
And our quest for more material
possessions suddenly become in vain.

Paul continues his point and turns his attention
instead to the people who were in his boat
as he moves into his message about
striving together toward the goal and pressing on.
Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith, so that, by my presence again with you, your boast might abound in Christ Jesus because of me.

Paul had planted the church in Philippi.
The Spirit used him to encourage people
to receive God's grace with their faith in Jesus Christ.
Paul may also have spent time with the Philippians,
helping them learn to row
in unison as their coxswain in Christ.
And he makes a few recommendations
on how followers of Christ should live.

Paul asks the Philippians to "**live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ**"
"Live your life," he says.
Live it well, as Christ would have you live.
But signs show this was more than
simply being good boys and girls.
First, there is the call to unity.
A life worthy of the gospel is a life lived in community,
in shared mission and ministry.
He wanted an endearing relationship
between the members of the congregation in Philippi.

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

And second, striving side by side is
not a byproduct of the gospel;
it is in the very design.
This unity, this shared striving,
is where the strength comes from—
the strength to stand against those
who would oppose the mission, he says later on.

To be honest, these are high ideals of communal life, my friends.
We all know how divided church congregations are today, right?
Divisions because of worship styles,
issues of dogma and doctrine, disaffiliation,
dress codes, lifestyles, and political leanings.
Leaving the body of Christ separated
into different denominations and tribes.

But we always have to remember,
when these things seem overwhelming,
that they are not new.
How do we know that?
Because Paul would not be reminding
the congregation to be unified.
That no matter what divides us,
we have to focus not on all believing the same thing,
but on being unified in our diversity in the crucified Christ.

There can never be enough of a focus on Jesus Christ,
that is, on the story of his life, suffering, and death,
and the gospel, the good news of salvation through faith in him.
Only when we hear this gospel time and time again
will we be able to live our lives
in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ".

But Paul adds one more twist to living our life.
And what is that?
The word in verse 27 live your life is
actually where we get our word politics from.
In some translations, the word is "conduct yourselves as a citizen"
in a manner worthy of the gospel.
But we're not supposed to get political, we're told.
The worlds are separate, we hear.
Just deal with faith stuff, spirit stuff, and not political stuff.

Paul argues that there is no separation.
How you conduct yourself as a citizen is a faith issue.
If the spiritual dimension of your life
never leaks into the political dimension, what good is it?
Is it really sanctifying if it never changes how you live?
Hear me: this is not a call to be partisan,
to promote a party or a candidate as a church,
but it is Paul saying to us that,
just as maybe we think our vote doesn't count or is not important, perhaps
That in reality it does, because it may not change anything,
But that as a citizen focused on Christ it is a part of living like him.

That It is a call to let your faith, and the community
within which you live, work, and grow,
guide you in living life in human society.
We are called, invited, and encouraged
to strive side by side for the kingdom of God
as envisioned by the one we follow.

And all of this forces me and all of us to ask this question…
If your faith in Jesus has no impact on the priorities by which you live,
the values you hold, the causes you support, then is it really transforming?

And how are we striving side by side to live in manner worthy of Christ?

We are called, invited, and encouraged to strive side by side
for the kingdom of God as envisioned by the one we follow.
We let the gospel be the measure by which our lives are shaped.
So let us press on.
And for this series, I would like to do each week
what is called a breath prayer—
a simple, meditative prayer practice
that reflects on Paul's words to the Philippians
and the theme of pressing on.

For this first week, I want to encourage
us to use this breath prayer: (Breathe in) We are God's people;
(breathe out) together, we press on.