

## Stand Firm

Philippians 3:17-4:1

February 28, 2010

I'm a new fan of Star Wars. Well, actually my five-year-old grandson, Evan, has become one. As a result, I've had to finally breakdown and start watching this series of science fiction films that has enthralled several generations so that I can converse with him and he will stop giving me these strange looks when I mispronounce the names of these digitally created characters that have become his friends. I'm a comedy and romance film guy – no blood and guts, shoot 'em up, or scary movies for me, no sir.

Now, Evan discovered my apparent ignorance about Star Wars as we attempted to put together some of his newly acquired Lego models of the space vehicles portrayed in the stories and longingly and repetitively checked out other available products on lego.com.

It's my own fault. While visiting several of the Disney Theme Parks after Christmas a few months ago we went one day to the Hollywood Studios. There he had the opportunity to obtain his own light saber and go a round with Darth Maul. (Please, no one come up to me after the service today and make any comments about the inappropriateness of a grandfather allowing a five-year-old watch Star Wars.)

Now, why am I referencing this new necessary endeavor? Well, it's because of a scene in Star Wars I where the Gungan people are engaged in a battle with droids of the Trade Federation and they are led by Jar Jar Binks. The first part of the battle is fought with Jar Jar Binks' forces inside this bubble-like protective shield and the Trade Federation forces unloading their artillery power at the bubble and being repelled. When the droids are finally activated and begin their march on the Gungan people, Jar Jar Binks shouts to his warriors – "Steady" – "Steady." That caused me to think of scenes in other movies when someone in charge shouted similar instructions for those under their leadership: "be strong," "don't give up the ship," "it's not over 'til it's over" to name a few. But then there are also the ones attributed to history like "Don't fire until you see the whites of their eyes," offered by American officer William Prescott in the Revolutionary War at the Battle of Bunker Hill. Paul instructed the Philippians to "stand fast" or "stand firm" in the portion of his letter Jeff read for us a few moments ago. The word he used was a word used to define how a soldier was to react in battle when his enemy was advancing toward him.

"Stand fast" - "Keep the faith" – "Hang in there" - "Don't let the devil get the best of you" - "Remember who and whose you are" – are some other ways people of faith have put it.

Maxie Dunnam shared in one of his sermons of a time when he was editor of the Upper Room that he received a phone call from a young woman. She was a musician and The Upper Room was publishing a book of poems by her. She had experienced a dramatic conversion about three years prior to the telephone conversation. Maxie noted in his sermon what a really life altering experience her new relationship with Christ produced in her. She'd had some problems with drug abuse, been sexually promiscuous, and had some pretty warped values about what was important in life. He noted that the change in her was incredible – that the experience of being pardoned and cleansed from all that was not good in her life practically made her a new person – the term used in some circles "born again" really was a good description of the new life she was attempting to live.<sup>1</sup>

Many of her closest friends were already on the top. She was so grateful for what God did in her life that she committed all her talents and energy to writing gospel music. Despite how happy she was with the change in her life, life was tough for her. She was depressed the morning she called Maxie and confessed to him: "It's

hell this music world – cocaine, alcohol, madness for money and success – it’s hell. I don’t know how I’m going to make it. I want another world, Maxie. I don’t want to live like the people in this world, but I’m being pulled into it. It’s impossible to resist it. I need your support and prayers.”<sup>2</sup>

The Philippian Christians were struggling with this sense of living in two worlds as well. And many of us have made the decision to side with Christ and then become aware that it’s not all peaches and cream – not an easy road of comfort and joy. Sometimes there is this feeling that we are citizens of two places – where we live our daily lives and this sense that there’s another reality besides that one – some refer to them as the earthly one and the heavenly one. One of the points Paul wants to make in his letter to the Philippians is that is indeed the situation.

Paul was fully aware that he like many of the Philippians was a Roman citizen – with all the rights, responsibilities, and protections such citizenship offered. But, he also knew that that citizenship was temporal – temporary – and often corrupt – often offering the opportunity to make gods out of things and people that don’t last.

Paul was attempting to help the Philippians, and thus us, understand that they and we are also citizens of the Kingdom of God – the Kingdom of Heaven. And that citizenship often calls for us to be different than those around us – to make different decisions for our heavenly good that make absolutely no sense for our earthly good. Paul’s attempt in his letter to the Philippians, and especially this portion of the letter, was to encourage the Philippians on their journey – to offer them some helpful ideas about how they might be able to go about being heavenly citizens on earth.

In the beginning of this portion of the letter Paul does something that I can’t imagine myself doing. He instructs the Philippians that they should imitate him. I would want to qualify such a comment with something like: “Do as I say, not as I do.” But, Paul said both: “listen to my words” and “follow my example.”<sup>3</sup>

While I have trouble believing even Paul would say such a thing, and am tempted to see it as another example of the unbelievable high opinion Paul had about himself, William Barclay shares in his Daily Study Bible Series some background information that helps us understand why perhaps Paul felt the need to offer this seemingly overly healthy invitation.

Barclay reports on the beliefs of the Gnostics of his day. The Gnostics were a group of believers in Christ who made a philosophy out of Christianity with their basic principle being that there are two realities – spirit and matter. They taught that spirit was altogether good and matter was altogether bad or evil. They argued that since the body is matter it is basically flawed and thus evil. Ready? Here was their argument: “Therefore, do what you like with it. Glut and (satisfy) its appetites. Since the body is evil anyhow it makes no difference what you do with it. So, gluttony, adultery, promiscuous sex, drunkenness are of no importance, because they only affect the body, and the body does not matter.”<sup>4</sup>

Barclay went on to describe another view of a group of the Gnostics that argued that a man couldn’t be understood as a complete man until he experienced everything life had to offer – good and bad. “Therefore, they said, it is a man’s duty to plumb the depths of sin just as much as it is to scale the heights of virtue. To such men to sin became nothing less than a duty so that experience might be complete.”<sup>5</sup>

Let me share a few more words from Barclay’s commentary: “They said that in Christianity all law was gone, that the Christian had perfect liberty to do what he liked. In other words, they turned Christian liberty into

unchristian license, and gloried in giving their lusts and passions full play. There were those who distorted the Christian doctrine of grace. They said that grace was wide enough to cover every sin and stain; that the love of God was great enough to forgive any sin; therefore, let a man sin as he liked and not worry; it would make no difference to the all-forgiving grace of God.”<sup>6</sup>

Paul called those who had chosen to be followers of Jesus Christ to a different understanding of things – a different set of principles – but he knew that we are all in need of some models of what this citizenship in the heavenly world in the here and now – not in the hereafter – ought to – can – should - look like – demand. Paul’s boldness (and maybe even his ego) aside, the truth of the matter is we need mentors – we need models – we need persons to imitate as we make our way in this world with our dual citizenship. The key to standing fast – to living the Christian life – is imitating those who seem to be doing it well – whose words match their actions – whose actions mirror their words.

I would suggest we ask ourselves a couple of questions. The first one is who are we imitating? You know, from whom are we learning what it means to follow Jesus in this messed-up world? Our spouses, who seem to be miles ahead of us spiritually? Some friends who have a little more experience – a little more maturity? Some members of a small group we might be members of? Maybe a parent?

The related question I would suggest we consider is: Who’s imitating us? Our children? Some coworkers? A spouse? “Whose understanding of Christianity is influenced by (our) words, (our) actions, (our) attitude? Who is learning from us?”<sup>7</sup> Who’s watching us?

One preacher offered that we can help people imitate us – we can help people learn from us – by sharing our strengths. “Everyone has a strength to share. Often it is a skill or talent that (we’ve) come to take for granted, but one that can make a difference in the life of somebody else, if properly deployed. Mentors share strengths. So do tutors, coaches and doctors. Chefs who teach nutrition to low-income families are sharing strengths, as are college students who read to children in preschool Head Start programs. Sharing strength is as valuable as donating money. Sometimes it’s worth more, because it cannot be bought.”<sup>8</sup>

Lent is a time of self-examination – a time for us to evaluate how seriously we are going about “standing firm” and accepting the challenge to live biblically centered lives. There’s no question it’s not easy. We can’t do it simply by relying on our own power. It takes modeling our lives after a person or two – imitating some folks who seem to personify Christ – surrounding ourselves with some people who can provide some signals about what it takes to do it – and first and foremost remembering and relying on the Holy Spirit’s presence within us. It’s not possible to stand firm on our own. The only hope we have of standing fast – of resisting the seduction of temptation – is reminding ourselves constantly that Jesus Christ is in us – that the Holy Spirit walks alongside us.

Ms. Tilly was a little Methodist woman from Atlanta, Georgia. She never weighed more than 100 pounds. She always looked about 8 years younger than God. In the 30’s and 40’s she and about 40,000 other women formed The Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching. Later on in her life she was an advocate for the desegregation of schools. As a result, she received numerous obscene phone calls. She was called many things other than the gentle woman she was. The calls didn’t stop her though. They didn’t intimidate her. She knew racism was evil and she knew as a white woman she’d had enough of it. She was determined to have her town, state, and country be rid of it as well.

She refused to resort to the tactics of those who tried to intimidate her. She had an engineer hook up a recording device to her phone and when she received those venom-filled phone calls late at night, instead of answering with hate, the message machine shared with the callers her baritone voice singing The Lord's Prayer. Courage and commitment came together in Ms. Tilly as they come together in all Christians who are in the Kingdom of God here on earth, living and expecting and standing fast in the Lord.<sup>9</sup>

Steadfastness and perseverance are hallmarks of the Christian journey. May it be so in our lives. Stand firm, brothers and sisters in Christ, so the curious will come to know the way of the cross – will experience the grace of God – the forgiveness of God.

Let us pray.

1. Maxie Dunnam, "In the Kingdom Now," 2006, 0-000-000-400.
2. Ibid.
3. William Barclay, The Daily Study Bible Series: The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1959), pp. 83-84.
4. Ibid., p. 84.
5. Ibid., p. 85.
6. Ibid.
7. Leonard Sweet, "The Five-Question Quiz," Homiletics, January-February, 2010, p. 70.
8. Bill Shore, The Cathedral Within (New York: Random House, 1999), p. 6 as quoted in "The Awareness of Christian Character," The Clergy Journal, May/June, 2009, p. 97.
9. "In the Kingdom Now."

## **A COMMISSIONING SERVICE**

### **GATHERING WORDS**

*(Friends, today we recognize the special ministry Marialice Bennett has been called to undertake as she assumes leadership roles with the American Pharmacists Association and commission her to the special tasks associated with her election. Today we also recognize not only the special responsibilities she will assume but also our roles in supporting her as she responds to both the confidence her peers have placed in her and the call of God on her life for this ministry.)*

### **RATIONALE FOR OUR GATHERING**

*(As Marialice and I talked over the last few months about her sensing a, what she terms, nudge to have a commissioning service we talked about a variety of reasons why this might be the case. She talked about how supported and directed by her faith she has felt throughout her life and unconventional career. She also talked though about her being a bit uncomfortable drawing attention to herself with such a service.*

*We talked about how she feels called to be positioned as she is today – not so much in the executive leadership roles of the American Pharmacists Association but rather the sense that God is using her in ways that she cannot see or know at this point. She put it this way when she tried to put it into words: “I have experienced a tremendous sense of anticipation over the past 2 – 3 years of something exciting about to happen in my life – as if I were in a preparation phase – a letting go phase. The nudge is strong and the need to reflect God’s purpose is strong.”*

*This service is being held (still her words):*

- 1) To acknowledge and remind myself that this is about my connection to God and not about me.*
- 2) To be thankful for what I have had the opportunity to experience and for what is yet to come.*
- 3) To bless the work that is before me and those in my circle of support.*
- 4) To bless my circle of support that will continue to enable me to answer God’s call.*
- 5) To commission all of us to seek God’s guidance for the roles he has called us to live.*

*Because of how important I believe all of you – my circle of support – are – Jon, Jon’s family, our Cum Christo groups, “The Sisters,” the Stephen Ministers, the Kitchen Sunday School Class, The Breakfast Club, the student*

*leaders, and special friends through the church, pharmacy department, and Cum Christo over the years – I wanted all of you to be included in what happens this afternoon in preparation for the years ahead.*

**\*CALL TO WORSHIP**

Leader: God calls us to worship and service.  
**People: We come to receive God's good gifts.**  
Leader: What do we need from God today?  
**People: We need the wisdom that can only come from God.**  
Leader: Why do we seek wisdom?  
**People: So that we will have the ability to discern what is good and right.**  
Leader: Your desire is pleasing to God, who grants your deepest longings.  
**People: We will use our gift of wisdom to worship God and serve all humanity.<sup>1</sup>**

**\*HYMN** *Be Thou My Vision* No. 451

**\*OPENING PRAYER**

*(Spirit of the Living God, we pray for Marialice as she continues to answer your call. Guide her as she faces further decisions and strengthen her when the path is long and hard. Keep all of us open to your guidance as we continue to offer our support and as we listen for your call in our own lives. This we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.*

**SPECIAL MUSIC** *Consecration* John Ness Beck  
Beth Morgan, Tyra LaPens, Candace

**OLD TESTAMENT READING** Micah 6:6-8 Cathy Davis

**NEW TESTAMENT READING** II Corinthians 3:2-3 (Marialice Friend)

**ACTS OF COMMISSIONING (invite Marialice to stand before the kneeler)**

*(Marialice, you have been called by God and chosen by your peers in the pharmacy world for leadership. This ministry is a blessing and a serious responsibility. It recognizes your special gifts and calls you to work among your*

*peers and for them. In love we thank you for accepting your obligation and challenge you to offer your best to the Lord, to the pharmacy community, and to our ministry in the world. Live a life in Christ and make him known in your witness and your work.*

*Marialice, do you this day acknowledge yourself a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ? "I do."*

*Will you devote yourself to the service of God in the world? "I will."*

*Will you so live that you enable your pharmacist community to be a people of love and peace? I will."*

*Will you do all in your power to be responsible to the task for which you have been chosen? "I will."*

*All who take upon themselves the name of Christ are called into ministries of love and service by the example of Christ. As you prepare to begin your work among your pharmacy community, we pray the blessings of God and this community of faith and all of those who are your circle of support upon your endeavors.)*

### **RESPONSE OF GATHERED COMMUNITY**

*(and now I need to ask all of you who are Marialice's circle of support: Will you do all you can to assist and encourage her in the responsibilities to which she has been called, giving her your cooperation, your counsel, and your prayers?*

**We will. We recognize you as an ambassador in ministry with the pharmacy community and dedicate you to this service in the name of Jesus Christ. Through our prayers we will be united with you in your work. May God richly bless your labors.<sup>2</sup>**

**LAYING ON OF HANDS** (Invite all those who are participating in the laying on of hands to come forward at this time)

*(Almighty God, look with favor upon Marialice who reaffirms her commitment to follow Christ and serve in his name as she assumes these new leadership responsibilities. Give her courage, patience, and vision; and strengthen us all in our vocation of witness to the world and of service to others; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.)*

**UNISON PRAYER (Let us pray together)**

**Today, O Lord, I yield myself to you,  
May your will be my delight today,  
May your way have perfect sway in me,  
May your love be the pattern of my living.**

**I surrender to you,  
My hopes,  
My dreams,  
My ambitions.  
Do with them what you will, when you will, as you will.  
I place into your loving care  
My family,  
My friends,  
My future.  
Care for them with a care that I can never give.  
I release into your hands  
My need to control,  
My carving for status,  
My fear of obscurity.  
Eradicate the evil, purify the good, and establish your kingdom on  
earth.  
For Jesus' sake,  
Amen.<sup>3</sup>**

**\*CLOSING HYMN**

*Here I Am, Lord*

No. 593

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1. David Trout, Sourcebook of Worship Resources 4 (Canton: Communication Resources, Inc., 2005), # P12, p. 26.
  2. The United Methodist Book of Worship (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1992), pp. 591-592, 599-600.
  3. Richard J. Foster, Prayers from the Heart (San Francisco: Harper, 1994), p. 24.