

Whine or Shine
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Living God, may your word be proclaimed and may we claim it with joy for our lives today. Continue to speak to us through my words or in spite of them. Amen.

Philippians 2:12-18

¹² Therefore, my loved ones, just as you always obey me, not just when I am present but now even more while I am away, carry out your own salvation with fear and trembling. ¹³ God is the one who enables you both to want and to actually live out his good purposes. ¹⁴ Do everything without grumbling and arguing ¹⁵ so that you may be blameless and pure, innocent children of God surrounded by people who are crooked and corrupt. Among these people you shine like stars in the world ¹⁶ because you hold on to the word of life. This will allow me to say on the day of Christ that I haven't run for nothing or worked for nothing. ¹⁷ But even if I am poured out like a drink offering upon the altar of service for your faith, I am glad. I'm glad with all of you. ¹⁸ You should be glad about this in the same way. Be glad with me!

Yesterday was the final day of the Indiana Annual Conference. If you've been around the United Methodist Church for a while, you might be checking your calendar at those words. Yes, it's October. And yes, we just finished our Annual Conference that is typically all wrapped up by the end of June. What can I say? It's been a tough year for all of us.

In a "normal" year, the three or so days spent at Annual Conference would be filled with things like:

- inspiring worship services with *thousands* of Hoosier United Methodists singing, praying, and praising God, and — for the clergy in the mix — giving thanks that we're not in charge of these services
- plenary sessions with mundane, procedural business to vote on alongside the occasional spirited debate from the Conference floor, all according to Roberts Rules of Order (of course)
- running into old friends in the hallways of the convention center and excitedly swapping stories about the things that happened since the last time we conferenced, or making new friends over the tables of the hotel's breakfast buffet or while waiting in line together

when all three thousand or so attendees decide to take a bathroom break at the same time

- and, of course, celebrating all the ways God has been and continues to be at work in our United Methodist Church in Indiana

Well, it's not a normal year, so Annual Conference didn't look anything like this. We conferenced over livestream and ZOOM — apparently an entire cottage industry sprung up this year to cater to the very niche market of virtual United Methodist annual conferences. Instead of meeting for three consecutive days in June, our work was spread out over three days in July, August, and October — because it turns out virtual conference is way more exhausting than regular conference, and screen fatigue is a real thing. And while we still voted and debated on the business before us, it involved things like web forms with ballot codes and voter ID numbers, along with virtual microphone queues utilizing ZOOM features like the Q&A, the “raise hand” button, and, of course, that ubiquitous unmute icon. There were laughable moments when folks would be thirty seconds into giving a report before they realized they were still muted and none of us could hear them. The phrase “Bishop, can you hear me now?” became the new opening line of every floor speech and presentation.

Even still, yesterday was a good day: We still worshipped God, celebrating the lives of the many faithful clergy persons and spouses in our conference who died this past year. We were inspired by words of encouragement and challenge from our Bishop and — my personal favorite — through a video message from the 97-year-old oldest living clergy person in our conference. We slogged through all of the essential business and even managed to pass some new things, including a commitment to dismantling racism in our conference — a motion that passed by a strong majority and unequivocally affirmed the importance of this work in our United Methodist Church here in Indiana.

And yet, it wasn't all sunshine and puppies. When we started the plenary session, the support team patiently walked everyone through the tech side of things. To test our virtual voting process, we were invited to vote in a sample ballot. They choose innocuous, sometimes even silly questions for these sample votes. This time, it was the seemingly-easy question, “Do you give thanks to God for the gift of technology that enables Annual Conference?” I'll admit, I caught myself pausing before casting my vote, but ultimately I voted, “Yes.” Turns out, however, that a sizable chunk of the conference wasn't feeling that same gratefulness. Just minutes into our session yesterday, it was clear that we Methodists were already a little bit cranky.

While I doubt they were dealing with never-ending ZOOM webinars, the church in Philippi must have had some irritations of their own since Paul went out of his way to tell them, “Stop your grumbling!” Clearly, crankiness in the Church isn’t a new thing. Author James Scott Bell facetiously wrote these words:

God created the world in six days.
On the seventh day, He rested.
On the eighth day, He started getting complaints.
And it hasn’t stopped since.¹

Griping and complaining are time-honored traditions.

We may not know what all was going on in Philippi, but Paul feels a need to encourage them to let go of their propensity for grumbling and arguing. To be clear, he is actually writing about grumbling. The Greek word used here is *goggusmos*, which is an onomatopoeia. Remember those? Words that sound like what they mean. *Goggusmos*. It’s a word for grumbings, mutterings, displeasure voiced verbally, even if under the breath. He is not speaking out against disagreement or dissent. He is calling out disagreeableness.

What I appreciate about Paul’s approach here, though, is that he doesn’t stop there. He could have just told them to cut it out and left it at that, but instead he goes on to offer a choice — Paul tells them there’s an alternative way of being they can choose, where they are “blameless and pure, innocent children of God.” Then, in my favorite part of this passage, he says they can “shine like stars in the world” because they’re holding on to the word of *life*.

I love that image — shine like stars. It brings to mind memories of camping out, somewhere far away from the light pollution of the city, and looking up at night to see a vast, endless, inky-black sky peppered with the brightest dots of lights somehow shining down on us across unfathomable distances of space and time. Stars know how to shine, even in a sea of darkness.

“Do everything without grumbling and arguing so that you may be blameless and pure, innocent children of God.... shine like stars in the world because you hold on to the word of life.”

¹ *Sins of the Father* by James Scott Bell

I hear Paul inviting us to choose our words carefully. We *could* choose words of complaint and crankiness. That would certainly be understandable in 2020, perhaps even expected. Or we could make the surprising choice, choosing life-giving words. What words will we choose today?

As I was wrestling with this question of words, the opening of John's Gospel kept coming to mind. Do you remember how it starts? "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God." It goes on in grand poetic fashion, saying, "What came into being through the Word was life, and the life was the light for all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness doesn't extinguish the light."

We read those words, understanding them as telling us something about who Christ is, the true Word. Christ is the Word who has been here all along, who is life and light for all the world.

"Shine like stars in the world." Most likely, Paul penned those words forty to fifty years before the opening words of John's Gospel were ever composed. And yet, they speak in concert today. One of the beauties of scripture is that these words are not static, stuck in time like some dusty, historical relic. No, scripture is living and breathing, a literary vehicle through which the Spirit moves and stirs today. Scripture provides a way for God to *continue* speaking, in and through these words we read. Paul may have never heard that poetry about the light that shines in the darkness, but his words enter a sacred dialogue with them even still. We can *choose* which Word we reflect to the world. We can *choose* to shine like stars, so that when people look at us, all they can see is that beautiful, blinding light of Christ.

Admittedly, it's easier said than done. There's a reason Paul had to say what he said... because our natural tendency is to grumble, argue, and complain.... even whine at times. And friends, I don't know about you, but I'm finding a lot to grumble about in 2020. It would be a whole lot easier to just go along with the rest of the world and wallow in our collective grumpiness, airing my frustrations in complaint letters, emails, or on social media, or even just in gripe sessions with friends so that we can commiserate over all that is so very wrong with the world. It might feel good. For a minute. But, if I'm honest, that feeling doesn't last. And that's not the call we hear today. "Do *everything* without grumbling and arguing..." It's the harder choice.

The Good News, though, is that we are not asked to do it on our own. Did you catch those words Paul wrote right before this instruction? He said, “God is the one who enables you both to want and to actually live out his good purposes.” *God* is the one. Friends, this hard work isn’t ours alone. *God* is here, ready and willing to work with us so that we can make the better choice. We just have to make room for the assist.

I was thinking about how these choices show up in our church life today. I’m not sure what worship feels like for those of you on the “congregation side” of our livestream, but on this end, it gets a little stressful at times. Back in the day — by that I mean, our pre-pandemic days — those of us helping to lead the service of worship could walk into the sanctuary and, most often, feel a sense of peace and assurance about all that was about to happen. Now days? We feel a palpable sense of strangeness in our physical distance from each other and from you. We brace ourselves for the unforeseen challenges of technology, no matter how much we try to stave them off. We wonder if there’s even anyone praying with us, singing with us, worshipping with us. There’s a lot of fodder for grumbling, complaining, and arguing on this end. I suspect you have your own causes for that on your end as well.

And yet, there is also great opportunity — opportunity to choose a different way, to choose some different words, to choose a different spirit. You know, we have some folks gathered in the Sanctuary this morning, a small group of musicians who are faithfully leading us in worship through song. There is plenty of stress over there, I suspect. They’re worrying about the music, of course. But they’re also anxiously listening for cues so they’re ready to sing when the livestream — that they can’t really see — switches over to them. They’re scrambling to adjust plans at the last minute as singers have to drop off due to unexpected covid-quarantines. They’re wondering what they sound like to the rest of us. And yet, I watch them and listen to them each Sunday, and I’m so grateful for the spirit they bring into this space — a spirit of worship and love, and a seemingly non-anxious presence of peace. I’m sure they have their moments, but I appreciate the ways they pause, breathe in the Spirit, and then *choose* to shine like stars in the world, or at least in this livestream.

Friends, we have choices. We can whine or we can shine. The world’s already got plenty of the former, so I think I’m gonna choose the latter. Will you join me?

Let us pray:

Holy One, Word of life and light — let’s be honest. This is not a great year. There’s a lot to grumble about. More often than not, the easy path seems to be to dwell in discontent, but you have called us to make a different choice. You call us to shine like the stars, to be a

beacon of your light in a world that desperately needs a little brightness. But God, it's hard. We need you to help us choose that path. Remind us to pause before we speak, to make room for your Spirit to enter us, and then fill us with your life and light so that goodness bursts forth in all that we say and all that we do. May we be your shining stars in this world today and always. Amen.