

WHAT WE CAN'T LIVE WITHOUT
Sermon for Pentecost 17A-Phil 3:4b-14
LPC, 10/5/14

Have you heard about the tiny house movement? A tiny house is a detached, self-sufficient home that takes up a piece of ground not much bigger than a standard parking space, and can be purchased for about the price of new mid-size car. Tiny houses have fully functional kitchens and bathrooms, living space, and sleeping accommodation for up to four adults or more. They are miracles of efficiency and engineering, and often, really, really attractive.

The primary market for tiny houses is not low-income families but people interested in conscientious living. These folks typically are concerned about the environment and wish to dissociate from the American obsession with size and stuff. Now of course living in a 400-square-foot home (and some tiny houses are smaller than that) requires an adjustment for people who are used to living in a standard American home of 2,500 square feet or more.

I saw a TV program last week about a family of four: mom, dad and two teenagers, who were moving into a tiny home. The first thing they had to figure out was what they couldn't live without. What were the possessions of which they could divest without compromising their happiness or sanity?

Interesting exercise, isn't it? What are the things of which we could divest without compromising our happiness or sanity? What are the things we can't live without?

Most of us can learn to live without a lot of possessions, and even to enjoy the freedom that comes from divesting of property. But there are non-material things we can't live without, or assume we can't. And some of these things genuinely are worth more than rubies: our heritage, our citizenship, our freedom, our families, our integrity, our very lives. These are the things we rightfully most value. Are there any of those we can't live without?

St. Paul is a challenging writer when it comes to questions like this.

The situation surrounding his letter to the Philippians, a portion of which we heard this morning, is this. Paul himself founded the Christian community at Philippi some years before this letter was written. Although he moved on from there in his missionary travels, he maintained an affectionate relationship with the Philippians. At the time of the letter, Paul was imprisoned, apparently on a capital charge. Tradition holds that, although the imprisonment referred to here could be any one of several Paul endured during his missionary career, this particular instance is his final incarceration at Rome, which led to his execution.

The Philippians are, understandably, concerned for Paul. They have sent him gifts and messages. Part of the purpose of this particular letter is that Paul may reassure people who love him. But further, Paul uses the opportunity of his own mortal danger to

The Very Rev. Cynthia Byers Walter

teach the young church about what faith in Jesus really means. This teaching is timely, because the Philippian Church is starting to feel anti-Christian pressure. What Paul is teaching them here will be valuable to them as they begin to experience persecution, if they take the teaching to heart.

In the eyes of the Philippians at this point Paul has lost much of what most people can't imagine living without. He has lost his freedom. He has lost the status his Roman citizenship afforded him. He lost the company of friends and supporters. He is in danger of losing his health and even his life.

Paul's response: "Whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord." In other words, "Don't worry about me. I have everything I need by knowing Jesus Christ."

It is one thing to be told that we should value our Christian faith above all other things. It is another to see someone actually doing this. See how Paul does it? He doesn't grit his teeth, stiffen his upper lip and resolve to face his unjust fate with courage and dignity. He joyfully faces whatever God may have for him. He considers that he is God's own possession regardless of whether he lives or dies. As a matter of fact, in an earlier passage from this letter Paul weighs the possibility of death quite dispassionately and figures that since death will bring him closer to Jesus, he, Paul, might actually prefer it to being acquitted.

As Paul continues writing to his Philippian friends he warms to his subject and becomes quite passionate: "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own."

Christ Jesus has made me his own! What power those words give! They give the power to hold all things lightly, even one's own life! If there's one thing we can't live without it is this.

I have seen too many people approach death, as Paul did, with serenity and even eagerness, to doubt that this is true. These are people who, in most cases, have had to divest of all the things we generally consider necessary: not only possessions but health, independence, privacy, dignity. Helpless in nursing or hospital home beds, I have seen them press on, sometimes even with joy because Christ Jesus has made them his own. These people approach death with serenity because of faith in Christ Jesus. Can we not approach life with serenity because of faith in Christ Jesus?

Sooner or later all those things we assume we can't live without – our property, our jobs, our prestige, our health – will probably pass away or morph into something unrecognizable. Even our families, those we love, are fragile, and there is no guarantee we will have them always, in this life. One thing endures, and that is the conviction, the power, of being Christ's own, in life and death. We can't truly live, really live, abundantly live, without this one thing. But the good news is: we never have to.