

Pastor's Message – 10/11/20
Philippians 4:1-9

Imagine that it's the year 2520 – 500 years from today – and you are browsing about in a library (if such places even exist in 2520) and you come to the ancient history section.

As you scroll through the titles, you come across “The Most Important Events of the 20th and 21st Centuries,” which may not exactly catch your attention but, you take it down from the shelf anyway. You open the book and there's a list of the top 10 events that shaped the world way back then and still matter in 2520.

Here's the question to ponder: What are the top two events listed in the book? What events that have occurred in your lifetime will be remembered for 500 years from now?

In order for us to understand the question more fully, it might be helpful for us to go in reverse. What do you think were the two most important events that occurred within the last 500 years – all the way back to 1520 or so?

Few things of what was important to the people of that day seem important to us today. We're a lot more focused on the present, seeing the big events in our time as “earth-shattering” while not realizing that 500 years from now they've been swept into the dustbin of history or consigned to an obscure Ph.D. dissertation – which is pretty much the same thing.

Hard for us to imagine, but things like the nomination of a Supreme Court Justice or protest marches or this year's election or even the coronavirus pandemic may only be a blip in the grand scheme of things.

What do we honor or revile from 500 or even 100 years ago? Wars? They seem so all-encompassing at the time, but once the veterans and contemporaries are gone, they seem less pivotal and fall into the long line of human conflicts that seem to happen in every age. As memories get fuzzy, the reasons for the wars themselves become less apparent. What makes a particular war or battle stick in the mind of history is really more about the literature surrounding it.

Take, for example, the Battle of Gettysburg. Thousands of tourists flock to this little Pennsylvania town every year, despite the fact that, while this 1863 battle was pivotal in the Civil War, it was not decisive. The war would drag on for nearly two more years. We remember Gettysburg mostly because of what Abraham Lincoln said there in his address some four months later.

The same could be said for The War of the Roses, which would have completely faded from memory had not William Shakespeare written a series of plays around it.

Even world wars tend to lose their impact in time. World War I, the “war to end all wars,” quickly faded in the face of World War II which is, itself, being replaced in the collective consciousness by whatever war we happen to be presently fighting.

If even war doesn’t stand the test of time, what does? Scandal? Can you name the players and the problem in the Teapot Dome scandal? Can your kids or your grandkids tell you what Watergate was about? Will anyone remember Enron 500 years from now?

How about art and architecture? You could make a case for both being more lasting. The pyramids stand as a monument to Egyptian culture and the Sistine Chapel is a beautiful work, but are they the first things that leap to mind when you consider the time in which they were created? There are probably only a handful of such architectural and artistic works that could evoke long-term memory, while there are so many more that lie forgotten.

Sometimes things do last and sometimes people are remembered. I wonder if Euodia and Syntyche would have changed anything in their relationship and their conflict if they knew then that they would be remembered and still talked about now: almost 2,000 years later? What will history remember about us in 2,000 years? Paul writes to the Philippians and to us about what is really important and about how we are to live our lives and related to each other.

An article in the *Christian Century* magazine suggested that the kind of church that Paul has in mind tends to happen nowadays in the parking lot of the church or on

Facebook and other social media and not in worship services in the sanctuary or in the church building at all. So, maybe it's important to take what we hear and what we learn here into the other areas of our lives?

We Christians can disagree over some of the smallest, most ordinary things. Group therapy is now available for congregations who want to learn skills for getting along peaceably within the body of Christ. A congregational therapist tells the story of a church that almost split over the issue of mashed potatoes. I know it sounds a little trivial, but to the people involved, it was a most significant matter.

The problem at hand was a proposed change at church fellowship dinners -- whether to continue making mashed potatoes the old-fashioned way or to begin using instant potatoes. One faction declared that the only real mashed potatoes were the ones you lugged back from the supermarket in huge mesh bags, scrubbed, peeled, cut up, boiled, drained, and then mashed while you were adding milk, butter, salt, and pepper.

The other group declared freedom, that a new day had dawned, and there was no longer time for so much preparation. The twenty-first century is a time to rejoice and give thanks for tasks made easier. Just boil water in the microwave, measure and pour potato flakes, stir, and, voila, mashed potatoes in minutes. And they most certainly are real. It says so right there on the box, "Real Mashed Potatoes." So, what is all the fuss about?

Some of our disagreements would probably sound every bit as foolish to another congregation as the mashed potato episode, but nothing with the potential of tearing a church apart is ever frivolous. It is very real to those involved and of the utmost concern. Mashed potatoes may prove to be the little snowball that triggers a deadly avalanche within the congregation.

Every Congregation has had, is currently experiencing degrees of conflict, and will have new conflicts in the future. Paul, in his Letter today, gives us advice both about "conflict management" and about "conflict readiness." Paul's worldview of what really lasts was bound up in his

understanding of the cross and resurrection. The death and resurrection of Christ was the linchpin of history, ushering in a new age and anticipating an age to come. He understood that human history has an end point, but God's kingdom does not. Rather than promoting great deeds or monuments to mark his place in history, Paul sees his own history as culminating in his desire to "know Christ and the power of his resurrection" (3:10) – to focus in on the timeless nature of knowing and following Christ. Everything else – accomplishments, reputation, legacy, fame, knowledge – was, as we heard last week, "skubala" (3:8).

What really lasts, says Paul, are the ideas and actions that mirror Christ: "Whatever is true, and honorable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise" (4:8). Paul offers several pithy principles for the Philippians (say that fast, three times), the guiding principles he observes for his own life and recommends for his Philippian friends:

- Always be full of joy in the Lord. (v. 4).
- Let everyone see that you are considerate in all you do. (v. 5).
- Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need and thank him for all he has done. (v. 6).
- Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise. (v. 8).
- Learn to be content with whatever (I) you have. (v. 11).
- You can do everything through Christ, who gives (me) you strength. (v. 13).
- God who takes care of (me) you will supply all your needs from his glorious riches, which have been given to us in Christ Jesus. (v. 19).

Paul's Pithy Principles. In our present conflicts and the conflicts yet to come, the way we live our lives has an impact on our church, our communities, our families, and on our lives, and what is still yet to be.