

Affluence Afflictions

Philippians 1:21-30 | 9/24/2017

This type of thing seems to happen to many people. You go to a restaurant. You're hungry and excited about the menu. You're having a nice time with the spouse. Everything is perfect. You've ordered drinks. Then you make your choice. "I'll have the 'Albacore Confit enSalade.'" "We're out of the albacore, I'm sorry." *Hmmmm*. "Okay, do you have the 'Duck Breast with Pomegranate?'" "No." "What *do* you have?" "We have the 'Schnitzel with Potato Salad.'" *Fine!* I'll have that."

Has this happened to you? It's the sort of setback, irritation and frustration that illustrate affluence afflictions — relatively minor frustrations or irritants about which we complain only because of the absence of more serious problems, such as those that might be experienced by others. Here are some more examples of such problems, found on various social media:

- + The Wi-Fi at the resort was out for four hours.
- + No almond milk at the breakfast buffet at the Hilton.
- + The TV show wasn't in HD.
- + Asked for strawberry Chantilly in my Açai palm nuts and received chocolate instead.
- + For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain.

Oops! That last one doesn't belong in *that* list. It's something the apostle Paul writes in the Scripture reading from Philippians, and it definitely does *not* fit the afflictions of affluence definition. The only proper response to the other complaints in the list is "Poor baby!" This comment from Paul, however, deserves a different response, like "Wow!" Paul sets the bar high for how we should think about our relationship with Christ.

Paul and his co-workers had founded the church in Philippi some years before this letter was written. When Paul wrote this letter, he was in prison in Rome, and the Philippian Christians were worried about him, knowing that he might be executed for preaching Christ. In fact, they had sent one of their members, Epaphroditus, to Paul with a gift. As Epaphroditus was preparing to return home, Paul wrote this letter so he could carry it to the believers in Philippi. In this context, Paul's comment that living was all about Christ and dying was "gain" makes sense.

Essentially, Paul was saying, "Don't worry about me. My life is devoted to Christ, so if being faithful to him means I have to be in chains, that's fine with me. And if they should kill me, that's fine too, because I will receive eternal life and be with Christ forever."

We are not in anything like Paul's situation, but his words still challenge us to think about what really matters in life. In fact, that's the implied lesson of anything branded as an affluence affliction.

It's not really that those frustrations are of no concern, but that, in the larger perspective of life, they matter less and sometimes hardly at all. There's spiritual value to applying that perspective to how we deal with the challenges and opportunities of life, and how we help or don't help those who are suffering because of shortages of life's necessities.

Paul, in effect, urges us to remember that there's a future accounting for our lives before God, and there are also crucial days of decision in our current existence. The difficulty in choosing between the mocha or Frappuccino is barely a level-one problem. Deciding what to do about the needs of a suffering neighbor and the call of Christ are level-10 issues.

What's more, sooner or later, we all face personal tragedies -- the bone-crushing depression that follows a marital breakup, the death of a loved one, the self-destructive behavior of one of our children, the terror of life-threatening illness or something else equally weighty. We get to know words like sickness, accident, misfortune, injury, setback, troubles, catastrophe, pain and hurt up close and personally.

Paul's words suggest that *we take a long view*.

In an interview for *Clarity* magazine, writer Anne Lamott tells of an incident that helped her take a longer view. She says that she was raised to present herself in such a way that people would be either envious or approving. But, she admitted that keeping up a façade like that takes a lot of energy. But one day, Anne visited her friend Pammy who was going through chemotherapy. Anne pointed to the dress she herself was wearing and asked Pammy if it made her look fat. Pammy looked at her and said, "Annie, you just don't have that kind of time."

Anne says that Pammy's response was so profound, that "it was like I was in a cartoon and somebody conked me over the head. I got it." Anne goes on to say that Pammy has since died, but Anne says that she still lives by what Pammy said to her that day. She sums it up this way: "You don't have time to live a lie. You don't have time to get the world to approve of you. You only have the time to become the person you dream of being. You only have the time to clean out your mean and ugly spots, areas that drag you down and hurt other people. You only have the time to accept yourself as you are and start getting a little bit healthier so you can be who God needs you to be. In a way, it's exhilarating to say, 'This is really who I am, and I'm not going to pretend just because I have the sneaking suspicion I'm not good enough.' God meets you where you are."

Perhaps this is what affluence afflictions can do for us. When we recognize them for what they are, *we can look at what really matters*. That can even help us to see when something we're doing doesn't work. And then the fresh perspective of Paul's words can jog us in the right direction.

It may be ironic that we are here assigning to affluence afflictions the ability to help us keep things in perspective, because usually, it's problems at the other end of the scale that help us decide what's important. Think about those who have experienced the devastation of the earthquakes in Mexico, the massive hurricanes in the Caribbean, who have lost all their possessions, but who say, "All that other stuff can be replaced. Our family members are okay. That's all that matters."

The late Ellsworth Kalas, a noted preacher, told of being a guest in Wichita Falls, Texas, about a year after that community had been brutally hit by a tornado. He was hosted in a new home, where the owner invited him to stand in a certain spot in the front hallway. The man said, "Our old home was on this same location. The storm leveled it to the ground. Everything. I came to see what was left. There in the rubble, at this very spot, was a football. I don't know whose it was or where it came from. I picked it up, looked at it, then kicked it as far as I could. It seemed the right thing to do." After telling this story, Kalas said, "It was a wonderfully symbolic act, after life's values had been so mercilessly put to the test."

Perhaps some of our trivial complaints deserve the same kind of "kicking away."

And kicking away brings us to the word repentance, something we talk a lot about in the church. That word can refer not only to turning from sin but also turning from stuff that really doesn't matter and turning instead to stuff that does.

Paul's words can help us clarify our priorities. His words call us to work on being who God calls us to be. They remind us that while we must deal with some small stuff simply to function in the world, we should devote much of the time and energy we have to the things that matter most, both in this life and for eternity.

Pastor Keith