

Sunday, September 21, 2014: Philippians 1:21-30

The Philippians would have read "striving side by side" and thought of a phalanx of infantrymen.

by [Bruce K. Modahl](#) in the [September 17, 2014](#) issue

A multigenerational group from our church and school traveled to Kenya to visit a school with which we have a long relationship. Our group pitched in with students and villagers to make bricks for a classroom addition. In the course of that effort, we learned the Swahili word *harambee*, which means “working together for a common cause.”

We decided to use that word for the church and school’s annual theme. We cast about for a Bible verse to back it up and decided on the phrase, “striving side by side for the faith of the gospel,” adapted from the NRSV translation of Philippians 1:27.

The school faculty, however, did not like the word *striving*. While it means making a great effort, it can also mean struggling against opposition or contention. Strife is not something to be encouraged in the classroom.

Like most congregations, ours has had its share of strife. And throughout history, Christians have often strived side by side *against other people*. With the strife of pogroms, Crusades, and the Thirty Years’ War in view, we reasoned that *striving* was not a word we wanted in our theme verse.

We consulted other Bible translations. They all had something like *striving*. One even said *fighting*—definitely not classroom or congregation ready. So the faculty members decided to paraphrase the verse themselves. They did so with my blessing, settling on “working together for the sake of the gospel.” I dubbed it the Authorized Faculty Translation (AFT), available soon in a black leather, red-letter edition.

In retrospect, I wish I had pushed back against the faculty’s objections to the word *striving*. We missed a great opportunity when we chose to rewrite the text.

In the parables, Jesus takes what's familiar to his audience and lays it down alongside what isn't. Agrarian people knew the small size of a mustard seed; they were aware it produces a large bush that provides a home for many birds. The kingdom of God is like this, says Jesus. We understand why a man who finds a treasure hidden in a field will rebury the treasure and buy the field. The man's ethics are not the point. Jesus says the kingdom of God is like this, hidden in our midst. We understand it is a treasure we long to uncover and possess.

Paul too uses language and concepts his readers would have understood well. He borrows regularly from the marketplace, the courtroom, and architecture. Here the reference point is military: "striving side by side" is what Roman soldiers did. In and around Philippi, a large number of former Roman army officers were given land grants and settled with their families. So the Philippians would have read this and thought immediately of the phalanx, of infantrymen with shields interlocked and swords at the ready. An opponent never faced just one or two soldiers, but always a whole formation.

I served a congregation in Virginia Beach, near a naval air station. The congregation included U.S. Navy pilots and their families. When these pilots heard this passage, they pictured the wing formation they practiced over and over. Their training included repeated practice of this tactic, so that no matter what happened they would not break formation. Should they ever face combat, their survival depended on this.

I arrived at this congregation with a bias against those who serve in the military. I discovered that my biases were wrong. The people there were devoted to peace. Like Luther, they understood the military's role in society. They served in order to restrain evil and promote the common good.

Paul does not use military imagery to glorify warfare. Instead, he subverts this imagery. He turns the language of empire inside out and breaks the imagery open to new meaning. That new meaning unfolds as Paul begins the sentence, writing, "Live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ." Striving side by side is part of the gospel-worthy life.

We are to strive side by side with one mind, the mind of Christ. A few short verses later, Paul tells us to "have this mind among yourselves which is yours in Christ Jesus who though he was in the form of God did not exploit imperial power but

emptied himself, taking the form of a servant.”

The phalanx Jesus led was a ragtag band of disciples who would have nothing to do with each other except that the gospel brought and held them together. Angel squadrons did not fly in combat; they attended Jesus on the cross. In the old order, the one raised from the dead gets even with those who deserted him. He wreaks vengeance on those who falsely accused him and put him to death. In the new creation, Jesus gathers his scattered disciples and invites even his enemies to strive side by side for him, not for Caesar. He is Lord of a new commonwealth in which there will be no more sickness, sorrow, war, or death.

The language of empire is subverted throughout the epistles. “The peace of God which passes all understanding,” Paul writes in Philippians 4:7, “shall garrison your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.” In Ephesians 6, the gospel of peace is part of the armor of God.

In our school and congregation, we missed an opportunity to teach the way Paul taught, to redefine striving and strife and explore what this looks like in God’s new creation. However imperfectly we might have achieved this, we would have had a hand in uncovering the treasure hidden in the field, until Christ comes again and makes manifest the kingdom of God.