

“IN REMEMBRANCE OF YOU”

Philippians 1:3-11

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Woodbury UMC

June 20, 2021

The apostle Paul does not become the most important leader in first century Christianity by being a “sugar daddy.” We know from his letters that he often speaks sternly to the churches he has founded and nurtured. He admonishes them in no uncertain terms about their errant beliefs and behaviors. This is why the letter to the Philippians stands out among all the letters Paul writes. It’s not a lecture on doctrine or ethics written in combative prose. The writer has no arguments to make and no bones to pick. The book of Philippians is simply a piece of personal correspondence between an aging missionary and a church he cherishes. More than anything else, it’s a love letter.

Philippians is remarkable also because of the conditions under which it is written. The church at Philippi is the first congregation established by Paul on European soil. As he moves on to work with other churches, Paul continues to be a mentor and father figure to the Philippians. In turn they are supportive of him and his missionary efforts elsewhere. But at a later point Paul is imprisoned by the Roman authorities, and his only means of contact with the Philippians is by letter. So what we have in this little book is testimony to a deep friendship, a friendship turned bittersweet by Paul’s confinement in prison. In the verses we just read we hear the pangs of separation and the longing for reunion.

Even so, in this epistle there is no trace of sour grapes or self-pity. There is grief, to be sure, but it is good, clean grief. And more importantly, alongside this grief there is gratitude. Paul begins his letter to the Philippians with a prayer of thanksgiving and joy. This may seem like an unusual attitude for someone serving time in prison, but it is consistent with Paul’s spiritual outlook. In this same letter he says, “I have learned, in whatever state I am in, to be content” (Philippians 1. 4:11). In another epistle he calls upon his readers to “rejoice always . . . [and] to give thanks in all circumstances” (1 Thessalonians 5:18). It is small wonder that when Paul writes to the Philippians from a jail cell, he begins on a note of thanksgiving.

Though my own circumstances are quite different from Paul’s, I must tell you that I share the apostle’s feelings this morning. I am standing on the verge of a time of separation from you, the people I have loved and been privileged to serve for eight years. My sense of loss is overwhelming; yet in the midst of my grief, I feel gratitude. “I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, thankful for your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now” (1:3-5).

Notice that Paul’s gratitude is pointedly personal, and so is mine: “I thank my God in all my remembrance of you.” One thing I think we all appreciate about a smaller church is the opportunity we have to know one another by name, to regard one another as family. On a typical Sunday morning in Woodbury, I’ve not been preaching to a group of strangers or acquaintances. I’ve been preaching to friends, dear friends, to people whose stories I’ve heard and whose gifts and graces I’m familiar with. Looking out on your faces today, I see you who have been members of this church most of your lifetime, whose steadfast commitment is an inspiration to us all. And I see you who became members in more recent years, who brought new life and energy to this

congregation at crucial times. I see you whom I've been with only occasionally, and you with whom I've consulted or counseled on a more frequent basis. I see you whose burdens I've been honored to help bear in times of distress or illness or bereavement. And I see you who have helped bear my own burdens. "I thank my God in all my remembrance of you."

Notice that Paul's gratitude is not only for particular persons; it is for their partnership in ministry with him. The church at Philippi is perhaps the most cooperative and supportive fellowship in Paul's network of congregations. In unique ways Paul undergirds their efforts, and they undergird his. Together, they enjoy a level of teamwork which makes the "coach" very grateful.

Likewise, I am "thankful for your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now" (v. 5). In case you haven't noticed, this church is not run by dictatorship; it's run by a partnership. That's what the "priesthood of all believers" is all about. When you as church members see something that needs to be done, you don't just shrug your shoulders and say, "Let the pastor do it." You use your own God-given abilities to get the job done. Without prodding on my part, the church doors get unlocked, the altar cloths get changed, the Communion elements get prepared, the offering gets counted, and the bills get paid. You offer quality Christian education and fellowship opportunities for children, youth, and adults alike. You provide technical know-how that enables us to remain connected and proclaim the gospel in innovative ways. Best of all, you truly participate in hands-on ministry, praying and caring for one another and serving the community around us, bringing God's healing to those who are hurting. That's one of the things I most admire and appreciate about you. When you're a member of the Woodbury United Methodist Church, you are a full partner with your pastor in the work of ministry.

"I thank my God in all my remembrance of you," says Paul, ". . . thankful for your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now." Then he continues: "It is right for me to feel thus about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace . . ." (v. 7). If I had to identify one thing that binds our church family and all United Methodists together, this would be it: we are all "partakers of grace." Under this roof there is a common way of speaking and hearing the Christian message. The gospel for us is not bad news; it is good news. It is a message of mercy and pardon and hope. This message gives shape to a certain kind of fellowship, a fellowship that offers acceptance and freedom in the place of judgment and rigidity. I've noticed that when someone in this church experiences pain or failure, he or she doesn't have to withdraw or hide from the fellowship, because this fellowship is compassionate and supportive. You offer to one another the good news that "there is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1).

Eight years ago, I became a partaker with you of grace. I, a 64-year old stranger with a Southern accent, came to this church under appointment of the New York Annual Conference. But after only a few weeks in your company I no longer felt appointed; I felt adopted – adopted as a brother, as a welcome member of your household of faith. Over and over again, you've given me – a clergy person on the payroll – the same grace and support that you give to a lay volunteer. You've invited me into your hearts and allowed me to minister to you. And on countless occasions you've ministered to me. You were unfailingly patient and caring when my voice became raspy and I underwent multiple surgeries on my vocal chords. You expressed concern for my well-being during the worst days of the pandemic. You embraced my two daughters, their husbands, my grandson, my mother, and my brother as if they were members of your own family. Through

countless acts of kindness, you've shown me what unconditional love really is. You've enlarged my understanding of what it means to be unselfish, sacrificial, and faithful. In other words, you've revealed God's love to me. You've given me the opportunity to minister to you, and in the process, you've ministered to me. "It is right for me to feel thus about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace. . ."

Indeed, I am "thankful for your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. And I am sure that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ" (vv. 5-6). Friends, if Paul feels a bit of poignancy when he pens these words, I can certainly understand. The "good work" of God's grace in the Woodbury United Methodist Church is not yet complete. I will miss being here to see more of the finished product take shape. We have a physical house that we have every reason to be proud of. My challenge to you echoes the words of 1 Peter: "Like living stones be yourselves built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 2:5). I believe this "spiritual house" is still under construction, and that the God who began it has the resources and the will to bring it to completion.

On my first Sunday as your pastor, I told a story that bears repeating today. Some years ago a legend about Jesus was circulating among those who wanted to stimulate Christians to greater fervor. The risen Lord has returned to heaven where the archangel Gabriel engages him in conversation. Gabriel asks, "What plans have you made to continue your work on earth?" Jesus replies, "I have chosen twelve ordinary men to be my disciples." "And if they should fail?" asks Gabriel. Jesus answers, "I have no other plans."

The first time I heard this story I was mightily impressed. So Jesus relies on us, his disciples, and the whole enterprise depends on our faithfulness and hard work. Then I began to be suspicious of the notion that God has gone into early retirement, that God is unable to accomplish his purpose on earth unless you and I are on the job. Paul reminds us that God was at work in us from the very beginning, and that God won't stop working until the task is finished. To believe this is to spare ourselves of the grandiosity of thinking we can do it all by ourselves, or the despair of thinking that nothing can be done. You and I must have the humility to recognize that God is at work whether we are in action or not.

Who knows what form the ministry of this church will take in the years to come? Every church will have to re-invent itself in a post-pandemic world. But you have lay leadership that is creative and committed. You also have a new pastor on your doorstep who will bring energy and vision to your ministry and who deserves your full support. This church has as much promise as any I have ever served. But whatever your state of activity or level of success, it will not change my conviction that God is at work in this church. And God is not going to turn any of us loose until he has finished the work he has started.

This is why I can stand before you today and say in the midst of my grief, "I feel gratitude! I have hope!" "I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, thankful for your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. And I am sure that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ." Thanks be to God! Amen!