

The Gift of Encouragement

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First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida

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Philippians 1:3-11 (NRSV)

I thank my God every time I remember you, [4] constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, [5] because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now.

[6] I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. [7] It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel.

[8] For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. [9] And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight [10] to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, [11] having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

THE GIFT OF ENCOURAGEMENT

What can I buy my loved ones for Christmas?

That's the burning question in the Allen household.

Our family is expanding, and we want to show our love with gifts.

That's a good thing.

But, time is limited.

And in the rush of the season it also can become quite hectic.

I like to give good gifts to the ones I love, but we need to remember that the best gift can't be purchased at the department store.

The best gift comes from the heart, and I would suggest that one of those gifts from the heart is the gift of encouragement.

In our lesson for today, Paul gives the gift of encouragement to the congregation at Philippi.

How does Paul do that?

CAPTIVITY AND JOY

First, we need to note the circumstances under which this letter was written. Paul was in prison. He was a captive.

Often we do not appreciate the people in our life during the good times. When things are going our way, we tend to live a very unreflective life and even complain about minor inconveniences.

But, when things get rough, when we lose what we once took for granted, then we begin to understand the importance of our friendships.

The great theologian, Karl Barth was once a chaplain to people in prison. And in response to that experience he once said, “Only in prison can the good news be heard with clarity.”

He found that because the inmates had absolutely no control over their life they were ready to hear the gospel message.

Captivity denies community. And yet the gospel has the power to draw us into community, even during those times when we are most isolated.

Paul found that just the memory of Christian community could sustain him in this time of imprisonment. When he remembered the blessings of past relationships, he was lifted above and beyond his present circumstances.

He could give thanks and rejoice.

In fact, the words joy and rejoice are used over and over again in Paul’s letter to the Philippians. The letter to the Philippians is the most positive letter that he writes in the New Testament.

Why?

It is because Paul fills his “dead” time in prison by remembering the life-giving faith that was a part of that church.

The church at Philippi had always been a joy to Paul and in his later years as he languished in prison it became even more important to him. The people and their faithful ways became a light of hope, a source of encourage-

ment in a difficult time.

Paul may have been in prison, but his spirit was freed by the memory of God's grace in the past. And that memory encouraged him and helped him be a source of encouragement to others.

THE CALL

So Paul remembers the past.

Paul rehearses in his heart and mind how the grace of God has been at work in the Philippian church.

Everyday in his prayers Paul thanks God for what he and the Philippians had accomplished together.

They had been able to effectively preach the gospel, and that good work was still going on.

No doubt as he prayed Paul remembered that he almost didn't even go to Philippi. The Apostle had planned to go East and preach the gospel in that part of the world.

But, at Troas Paul had a vision.

He saw a man who said, "Come over to Macedonia and help us."

And so Paul went West instead of East.

And that God inspired change in direction seems to have made a difference.

Paul went over to Macedonia, stopped in Philippi and the gospel was accepted by many.

FIRST CONVERTS

Do you remember the story of the first converts?

There was no synagogue in Philippi, but God fearing people gathered by the river to worship. One of those God fearing people was a woman named Lydia.

Lydia was a successful businesswoman who loved and served God.

And when she heard Paul's preaching she became a follower of Jesus.

She graciously invited Paul and Silas to stay at her home.

Lydia's hospitality was a harbinger of things to come.

The Philippians proved to be a very generous people who took care of Paul's needs when he was with them and sent gifts for his support when he was away.

Daily Paul remembered this in his prayers and was encouraged.

But, of course, things didn't always go smoothly in his ministry at Philippi. The Bible tells us another story about Paul's time in Philippi that created quite a controversy.

There was a slave girl who was possessed by an evil spirit. She was what we might call a fortuneteller and this activity enriched her owners.

IMPRISONED AND FREED

But, Paul cast the evil spirit out of the girl, and that got him into trouble. Paul and Silas were thrown into prison because they had destroyed someone's business.

Paul could still remember what it was like to sing hymns with Silas at midnight while imprisoned that night. Despite the dire circumstances they somehow knew that they would be free.

And sure enough God sent an earthquake that shook the prison. The chains fell off and the doors flew open.

The jailor thought that his life was over, that all the prisoners would escape, and they would blame him.

But, it didn't happen that way. Everyone stayed in place.

Paul and Silas then told the jailer about Jesus. He believed, took the evangelists to his home, tended to their wounds, gave them something to eat, and then everyone in his house was baptized into the faith.

CONTENT IN ALL CIRCUMSTANCES

Paul would have never believed a story like that if he hadn't lived it himself.

And as he sat in prison, he thought, "I'm only here because God wills it. I know that if would suit God's purpose, he would send another earthquake to open these doors and loose these chains. For some reason, this imprisonment will accomplish God's purpose."

And so Paul was content in whatever circumstance he found himself. (Philippians 4:12-13)

It didn't matter if he had a lot or a little.

He believed that God would lead him for the rest of the journey.

And his joy and faith were bolstered by remembering the gracious ways of fellow Christians and the grace of God who allowed defeat to be turned into victory.

Rehearsing the grace of God in the past, gave Paul and the Philippians encouragement for living today.

REMEMBERING PAST JOYS

It is important to remember and give thanks for what God has already done in our lives.

This can be a great source of encouragement.

What people have been important to you?

Perhaps you remember a particular teacher who ignited a passion in your life?

Maybe there was a friend who was always there when you needed her?

It is important to remember those special people and those special times.

It is important to, as Paul put it, "hold them in your heart".

Paul did that every day.

He rehearsed the past in prayer.

Paul remembered and gave thanks for the grace of God as it was revealed in his experiences with these faithful Christians at Philippi.

I have found that this is the most helpful thing I can do when I am depressed by the circumstances of life.

I rehearse the blessings of the past.

I remember people, some living and some dead, who were an important part of my life.

I give thanks for them.

I remember them with joy.

I "hold them in my heart."

REMEMBERING PAST SORROWS

I, like Paul, can remember times when the situation in my life looked pretty bleak. Yet I can also remember how God used difficult circumstances, unlikely people and unexpected events to deliver me.

It gives me great joy to think about those people and those situations. When I think about how God delivered me in the past, I can have hope for the future.

As Paul wrote to the Philippians, the one who has begun a good work in us will bring it to completion.

God might not use an earthquake to deliver us as God did with Paul.

But, in difficult situations, God always cares for us through the ministry of people he has called. We do indeed look forward to that day when God will wipe away every tear, but in the meantime God sends us brothers and sisters to do that in His stead.

I have used this passage several times when I preached at former churches for a homecoming service. In each case I could recall specific ways that those congregations ministered to me in my time of need:

the friends who wiped away my tears when a family member died,
 the people who cared for my children as if they were their own,
 the Methodist prayer group that prayed for me and sent me a note of encouragement,
 the gifts that I received at a time when my resources were very meager.

The list goes on and on.

The more I thought about it; the more I was humbled by God's grace and the ministry of His people. I could truthfully say with the Apostle Paul, "I give thanks every time I remember you."

Remembering is the first task of the community of faith.
 When we remember, we give thanks and are encouraged.

THE STORY OF THE BIBLE

That's why we read the Bible.
 It's our way of remembering as a community of faith.

In the Bible we learn that the grace of God extends beyond our lives. The grace of God has also been at work in all the lives of the saints who have gone before us.

When we read the story of how God delivered his people in the past, we remember the promise that this same God will deliver His people in the future.

Just as God freed his people from captivity in Israel and just as God raised Jesus from the dead, so one day we will be freed and raised as well.

This is why the Bible is a word of encouragement. The story continues in our lives and in countless lives to come.

Just as God guided Paul to preach in Philippi so God guides us in our life.

Our lives are not just one thing after another. Our lives are a part of the plan and promise of God.

THE STORY IS NOT OVER

The Christmas season inevitably brings a flood of memories.

We remember presents bought with love and care. We remember the excitement of Christmas morning when we were a child.

And we also have memories that are not so good.

We remember the first Christmas that we did not make it home. We remember the first Christmas without the one we love.

But, the Christian community seeks to shape our faith beyond nostalgia about the past.

When we celebrate Christmas, we remember that it is just the beginning.

Paul told the Philippians in verse 6 of our lesson for today, "I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ."

Paul encourages the Philippians by telling them that their story is not over. The good work begun in them will not be completed until "the day of Jesus Christ."

They are a part of something really big.
They are part of something that is eternal.

I think the Apostle would tell us the same thing during this Advent season.
There is more to come for all of us.
There is more to do, more to experience, more to learn in the service of our Lord.

THREE ASPECTS OF ADVENT

There are three aspects to the celebration of Advent.

First, Advent is about the past, remembering the first coming of our Lord in the manger at Bethlehem and remembering how the grace of that Savior has changed our life.

Second, Advent is about the present, becoming aware of how the Spirit of our Lord comes to us today in the service of God's people.

And third, Advent is about the future. We look forward to the "day of Jesus Christ," that day when the kingdom of God will be revealed to all people.

To put it another way, we can say that the coming of Christ is a historical fact, a present reality, and a future hope.

If we are to celebrate Advent well, all three of these elements must play a role in our worship

The sacrament of the Lord's Supper includes all three of these Advent themes.

We eat the bread and drink the cup to remember the life, death and resurrection of our Lord.

We eat the bread and drink the cup to celebrate the communion of God's people here and now.

We eat the bread and drink the cup in anticipation of a time when people from the East, the West, the North and the South will sit down together to enjoy the wedding feast of the Lamb.

Let us encourage one another with these words.
Amen.