

## Overflowing Love

I've mentioned here before that Philippians is one of my favorite books of the New Testament. I don't remember when it first seized my attention but I do remember spending an entire semester working through it in my Advanced Greek class at Southern Seminary with Dr. John Polhill, over 23 years ago now (Good grief!). A segment of Philippians also plays a key role in the play, "Memo," by Jeannette Clift George, founding artistic director of the A.D. Players, the faith-based theatre company in Houston where I served for three years as Administrative Director and Assistant Artistic Director. When I was with the Players, the company was just beginning to move away from performing only Mrs. George's plays and into a broader repertory. "Memo," however, stayed in fairly constant use in our touring program into churches during the years I was there. Some of you may remember the "Cousin Euodia and Cousin Synteche" scene that a couple of you helped me present to illustrate another sermon on Philippians three years ago.

When I noticed several weeks ago that the Revised Common Lectionary features several passages from Philippians this fall, I decided it would be fun to plunge into this lovely book with all of you. I'm going to deviate a bit from the Lectionary in order to include more of the book, so with a quick break for Reformation Sunday we will be in Philippians until just before Advent.

To understand my delight in Philippians and, indeed, to understand Philippians, you must know the context of this letter from Paul, his relationship with the church in the past and at the time he wrote to them, and the situation of the believers in Philippi. As we look at that context, it should quickly become clear that the beauty of this letter stems from a very special relationship, one that every minister hopes to share with a church, and that Paul's fervent prayer for his friends in Philippi is one that applies to every Christian and is one that can move us deeply in our quest for a Christ-like existence.

Perhaps a little geography and world history is in order to begin with. At the time of Paul, Philippi was the chief city in the northern region of Greece, known then and now as Macedonia. The city had been founded by an ambitious young warlord called Philip of Macedon, who managed to conquer the warring city-states of Greece and bring them together in one empire with Philippi as capital. Philip is now best remembered as the father of a much greater conqueror, Alexander the Great, who managed to bring most of the then-known world under his dominion before his early death. By the first century A.D., the Macedonian Empire had long since been supplanted by the Roman Empire, but Philippi was still a key, influential city.

Acts 16 records Paul's famous dream concerning Macedonia. On his second missionary journey, after receiving the blessing of the leaders of the Church in Jerusalem to spread the Good News of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles, Paul is traveling throughout Asia Minor in the company of Silas and the young Timothy. The missionaries had planned to go to Bithinia, on the north central coast of Asia Minor, but as Acts records, "the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them," so instead they turned to Troas, on what is now the northwestern tip of Turkey, where they were joined by Luke. "During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us.'" When he had seen the vision," Luke writes, "we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them. We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony." Acts 16 tells how the men won the favor of

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Lydia, a rich dealer in purple dye, who took them into her house and helped them establish what may have been the first church in Europe. They met, by the way, down by the riverside, which has led some scholars of dubious sincerity to posit that they were actually the First Baptist Church of Philippi. All was not smooth sailing for Paul, however, as Acts 16 also contains the story of how he and Silas were beaten and imprisoned after casting out a spirit from a servant girl who had been making a good deal of money for her owners through the powers of the spirit. Ultimately, even this turns out well for Paul, as the jailer and his whole family are converted before Paul and Silas are released.

For Paul, then, the church at Philippi represents his first foray into the great missionary field of Europe; a first, successful step towards Rome, which must have been his ultimate goal. This, in and of itself, is enough to make him think of them with joy. We also know from other scriptural evidence that Paul visited Philippi at least once more and possibly twice. They have had enough time together to build a deep friendship. The Phillips translation of verses 7 & 8 reads, "It is only natural that I should feel like this about you all -- you are very dear to me. God knows how much I long for your companionship, with the deep love and affection of Christ Jesus." Based on what Paul writes to them, we can ascertain that the church has been faithful to his teachings; that they have grown and flourished although not without opposition. We will also read in Philippians about how the members of the church have supported their founding pastor with funds and even personnel during his travels and especially during his times of imprisonment. As Paul writes in our passage this morning, they have indeed "shar(ed) in the gospel from the first day until now... share(d) in God's grace with (him), both in (his) imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel." The Letter to the Philippians was probably written during Paul's final imprisonment in Rome, when he was waiting for the ultimate decision on his freedom or death. That he could write such a joyous, hopeful letter in such circumstances says a great deal about the quality of the relationship between the Apostle and this church.

The tone of the letter is also a reflection of the letter's purpose. It is clearly, from our brief reading this morning, a letter of deep friendship and thanks. It is also a letter of encouragement. Even a strong church needs a boost in difficult times. At Philippi, they are experiencing a problem which is a topic in many of Paul's letters. Despite the ruling of the Jerusalem Council, a group we might now refer to as fundamentalists are insisting that Gentile believers adhere to all the tenets of the Jewish Law, including circumcision. The church at Philippi is dealing with these reactionaries and it has caused confusion and stress in the congregation. Members who had previously been close friends are feuding; whether over doctrine or something else (the color of the carpet, perhaps) is unclear. In his letter, Paul aims at reassuring them that God will see them through these and any other difficulties. "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."

This introductory section of Paul's letter, with all of its reassurance, reminder of relationships and joy, builds toward what Paul writes is his prayer for his friends in Philippi. "And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God." The key to living the Christian life, Paul tells them, is overflowing love, the same kind of love that pours out of his heart for them when he writes, "I thank my God for you every time I

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think of you... It is only natural that I should feel like this about you all -- you are very dear to me. God knows how much I long for your companionship, with the deep love and affection of Christ Jesus.” The love that Paul has in mind is not the kind of love that Shakespeare’s Jessica speaks of in “The Merchant of Venice” when she tells Lorenzo, “Love is blind.” It is not infatuation or sentimentality although it is unconditional. It is love that comes with knowledge and full insight. Some of the commentaries I read this week call it “an intelligent and perceptive love,” “insightful... discerning,” “lead(ing) to spiritual growth and moral discernment,” “love which is well-informed and able to be critical, to differentiate faith from phony or destructive forms of Christian and other religion.” Paul understands that the love the Philippians must pursue, the *αγαπε* love that God has for humankind, is a love that stands against the criticism of his legalistic opponents who are ready to cry out against a sloppy, sappy, “anything goes” kind of love. But he also understands that discerning love is the defense against an unthinking judgmentalism. The Australian theologian William Loader writes, “Rigid adherence to laws is something Paul sees not only as erroneous, but also as destructive and the opposite of everything he would understand as holy and good. That is because for Paul God’s holiness consists in God’s love, not in a kind of self-protective obsession with order and rightness where laws and rules matter more than people. Paul’s stance echoes Jesus’ declaration that the Sabbath was made for people, not people for the Sabbath.”

What will be the ultimate effect of this insightful love for the Philippians? I want to turn to the King James Version of verse 10 here, which shares with many other translations a slight difference in time reference from the NRSV in your pews. Paul prays for love for the Philippians, “That ye may approve things that are excellent; that ye may be sincere and without offence till the day of Christ.” That lovely translation from J. B. Phillips puts it: “I want you to be able always to recognise the highest and the best, and to live sincere and blameless lives until the day of Jesus Christ.” The Greek word translated as “without offence” in the King James and as “blameless” by Phillips is *απροσκοποι*, which comes from a root meaning “to cause to stumble.” Paul is praying that the Philippians will have a loving attitude not only so that they may discern what is right in the eyes of God but also so that they will not cause their neighbors to stumble, to be offended.

Paul’s prayer then comes to its conclusion. If his friends are leading this life of wise love, in harmony with both God and neighbor, then others will be drawn into God’s community of love and will glorify God in the way of Jesus. The Philippians will “produce the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.” This is Paul’s vision for the church at Philippi and indeed for all churches of Christ Jesus. And remember, he has already said that he is “confident... that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.”

In his excellent commentary on Philippians for the Word Biblical Commentary, Gerald Hawthorne sums up Paul’s prayer beautifully: “...his prayer, though brief, is profound in its implications; it is a prayer for a Christian community (1) that it might overflow in an intelligent and perceptive love, (2) that it might have the ability to recognize and choose the truly essential things of life, (3) that it might be pure and never the means of hurting others, (4) that it might allow Jesus Christ to generate through it all kinds of good deeds, and (5) that thus it might be a

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community committed to honoring and praising God, and at the same time the cause of God being honored and praised by others.”

One of the greatest pitchers in the history of my beloved St. Louis Cardinals was Dizzy Dean, a fellow as well-known for his colorful personality as his prowess on the mound. “Ol’ Diz,” as he liked to call himself, had a quieter younger brother named Paul and sometimes called, rather inappropriately, “Daffy Dean,” to link him more firmly to Dizzy. Diz was fond of making exalted and ungrammatical predictions about what exactly he and his brother were going to do in baseball. “Me and Paul,” he would always begin. In spring training before the 1934 season, Dizzy told reporters, “Me and Paul’ll win 45 games this year.” As it happened, Dizzy won 30 and Paul 19 leading the Gas House Gang to a World Championship. As Diz also said, “It ain’t bragging if you can back it up.”

I told you that story so I could tell you this one. When it comes to the First Baptist Church of Philippi and Good Shepherd Baptist Church, “me and Paul” got a lot in common. I feel incredibly blessed in how you all have taken an untried pastor to your hearts, in the love you’ve extended to me and my family, in the fellowship in which you have included us. “I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now.” And, like Paul, “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.”

I don’t say this lightly or with blinkers on. I’m not indulging in blind love. I’m well aware that we are going to be facing challenges together. Already, we live in one of the least hospitable places in America for the Church of Christ Jesus and the message of Good News that we want to share. We live in a country at war, with some of our nearest and dearest serving or training to serve in very dangerous places. We live in a nation polarized by politics, where friends and family members can barely speak to each other civilly in the passion of the election season. We live in a world where we are instantly aware of the great needs of men, women and children suffering from the effects of war or natural disaster or simple poverty and we have begun to feel that we simply can’t do any more. We live on a planet on which the ecosystems may be breaking down due to humankind’s poor choices and we feel we can’t do enough fast enough to make a difference. Our national economy is tottering; our personal budgets are feeling the strain. Even this place, this sanctuary in the truest sense of the word, seems threatened. Our little chunk of the infrastructure is aging. We’re replacing the furnaces and who knows what’s next. The pace of change on our campus is accelerating as we draw near to breaking ground for our senior housing. Nothing seems stable. Everywhere is chaos.

And yet... And yet, like Paul, I say, “I thank my God every time I think of you... I am confident... that the one who began a good work in (us) will bring it to completion.” I don’t know what the answers are to all the world’s problems or even to our little local challenges, but I do know that God knows. And “me and Paul,” we know that God and God’s people will ultimately prevail. So, like Paul, I pray that your love may overflow more and more. After all, as a president in another time of financial crisis said, “the only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” And, as we read in the Scriptures, “perfect love casts out fear.”

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And so, my sisters and my brothers, I pray that your love may overflow. I pray that it might spring from the gift of the Holy Spirit within you and overflow across all your lives, wiping out all fear and insecurity. I pray that your love might overflow across each other, lifting each other up and wrapping each other in the embrace of koinonia fellowship. I pray that your love might overflow across this community, calling people to come and lay their burdens at the feet of Christ. I pray that your love and the love of all who are Christ's great Church would overflow across this beautiful, broken world, until all creation is healed and the Creator is honored. May the healing, ennobling, sanctifying love of Christ Jesus be with us all, on this day and on all our days to come. Amen.